

# CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT



# IDS Bulletin

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**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Introduction: Connecting Perspectives on Women's Empowerment

Deepta Chopra and Catherine Müller

**Abstract** With the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) on gender equality and women's empowerment, debates around empowerment of women find themselves at a critical juncture of donor preferences, programmatic and movement activity and the lived experiences of women. This introductory article summarises some of the primary debates surrounding women's empowerment across three lines: economic empowerment and its links with poverty reduction – focusing on the intersections between paid work and unpaid care work; social empowerment in terms of changes in gender norms and values; and political empowerment and mobilisation. The interconnectedness of these three domains of empowerment is important to bear in mind while looking ahead – especially with high levels of intersecting inequalities and power structures that prevent the realisation of empowerment. We conclude that a process of collective notion of empowerment that focuses on addressing structural inequality and accords primacy to women's own agency, would go a long way towards expanding women's opportunities and choices – in other words, realising women's empowerment in a meaningful way.

## 1 Introduction

Debates around 'women's empowerment' have been both multifarious and complex, with different meanings, purposes and values ascribed to the empowerment of women and girls. While some of these debates are on the nature of women's empowerment ('is it a process or a goal?'; 'how much does economic empowerment matter?'), others are on its purpose ('is empowerment a means to some broader development goal?' or 'does empowerment have intrinsic value?'). Women's empowerment has been conceptualised primarily along two lines: (1) as a goal, with aims and targets – mostly by the development industry; or (2) as a continuous process of change in which women empower themselves and challenge patriarchal structures and institutions – mostly by social movements and scholars (Nazneen, Darkwah and Sultan 2014; Cornwall and Edwards 2014). Another significant debate centres around the purpose of women's empowerment. One view sees empowerment as individualised and instrumental, which Sardenberg (Sardenberg 2008, this *IDS Bulletin*)

termed as 'liberal' empowerment. In this approach, empowerment is a means to achieve developmental goals – for example poverty reduction. On the other hand, 'liberating' empowerment is more collective in nature – it is the 'process by which women attain autonomy and self-determination' (*ibid.*). The liberating empowerment is an end in itself, yet it also is an instrument for challenging patriarchal norms and institutions (*ibid.*), even though attaining autonomy and self-determination may not be enough to challenge these structures.

It is widely accepted that there is a strong link between women's empowerment, gender equality and development.

Women's location at the intersection between production and reproduction, between making a living and caring for the family, makes the organisation of gender relations central to the nexus between economic growth and human development, and hence central to the development agenda (Kabeer 2015a).

Women's standing in society has major implications for its economic, social and political functioning. For example, the failure of social institutions to support women's autonomy, bargaining power in households and private returns of investments in girls, is linked with lower female education, higher fertility and higher child mortality rates. Klasen and Lamanna (2009) link higher gender gaps in education and employment to considerable reductions in economic growth in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. This Archive Collection presents some of the leading articles that have appeared in *IDS Bulletin* over the last 48 years, seminally influencing the debates on the link between women's empowerment, gender equality and poverty.

The focus of this Archive Collection is reflective of the critical juncture that the understanding and realisation of women's empowerment finds itself in. This juncture is formed on one side of donor institutions in the development industry pumping large amounts of resources in to programmatic activities aimed to achieve empowerment of women and girls; at the same time as positing the realisation of this empowerment as the conduit for economic growth and poverty reduction. On the other side, for the first time ever, there has been international agreement on the goal of gender equality as a stand-alone goal – of which women's empowerment forms a critical component. Finally, struggles on the ground for gender equality bring to the fore real challenges and debates on how women can realise and progress towards an ideal of empowerment. It therefore becomes crucial to understand how ideas around empowerment have evolved, and the influential role that authors contributing to the *IDS Bulletin* over the years have played in this. In this introductory article, we set out the primary debates surrounding women's empowerment, delineating these across three lines: (1) economic empowerment and links with poverty reduction and work/unpaid care work participation; (2) social empowerment in terms of changing gender norms and values; and (3) political empowerment

and mobilisation. We end by examining future directions for women's empowerment, including debates regarding a growing concern around inequality and the relevance of women's empowerment to it, and assessing the potential contribution of the SDGs to strengthening empowerment processes.

### 1.1 Expanding the boundaries of economic empowerment

The **economic component of empowerment** has been viewed both as a precondition for achieving empowerment as well as the indicator for the achievement of this goal. Debates concerning economic empowerment have centred around the links between poverty and gender. Poverty analysis was initially not sensitive to gender issues, but contributions from feminists have challenged this, highlighting both inequities in intra-household distribution of resources, and focusing on reducing poverty levels of female-headed households. The gendered nature of poverty has been widely accepted, resulting in anti-poverty programming focused on women, along with the prevalence of sex-disaggregated indicators. However, feminist perspectives on linking gender and poverty issues have also highlighted the contradictions between reducing poverty and increasing women's empowerment. Razavi (1997, this *IDS Bulletin*) shows how increasing household incomes do not necessarily translate into better wellbeing for females in the household. She demonstrates how, with increasing income, twin-sided forces of expanding constraints on women's paid work and restrictions on their control over income are often at play (*ibid.*).

The other significant critique of women-focused anti-poverty programmes is how these programmes see women only as mothers or wives, who 'offer a means to' reducing poverty, increasing education levels and so on (Jackson 1996). This instrumental approach and 'the conflation of gender concerns with poverty matters allows issues of gender discrimination and injustice... to disappear from the agenda' (Kabeer 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*). Moving beyond the simplistic income-based poverty reduction agenda and women's role in it, to acknowledging the critical vulnerabilities that women face (Razavi 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*), recognising their differential experiences of poverty, and tackling the underlying causes of deprivation towards an expanded notion of wellbeing (Kabeer 1997, this *IDS Bulletin*), therefore is critical for realising women's empowerment.

A primary measure of economic empowerment has been the level of income that is earned by women, primarily through their participation in the labour market. There has been a lot of work delineating the gendered nature of markets, and the discrimination that women face in the labour market. It is therefore important to focus on creation of opportunities and removal of barriers for women to participate within the labour market (*ibid.*), including a focus on broadening the choice of sectors that women can productively engage in. Equally important, though under-researched, is to understand the disproportionate levels of **unpaid care work** that women undertake, and the effect that this has on their labour force participation. Pervasive social norms and sticky gender roles across both



the developing and the developed world dictate what roles women do at home and their participation levels outside the home in social, political and economic life. There is a strong correlation between women's life stages and their entry/retention into the labour market (Chopra 2015). Further, care responsibilities often impact on the location and type of job – women with young children prefer working close to or at home with flexible hours – something that only the informal economy provides. The impact of this can be severely debilitating, leading to women working in low-paid, irregular, high risk and often unsafe jobs. Combined with lack of recognition of and support for their unpaid care work responsibilities, this leads to a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability that women find themselves in, thereby 'limiting the extent of their economic empowerment – both individually and inter-generationally' (*ibid.*).

It is therefore important, as Vinkenburg (2015, this *IDS Bulletin*) argues, to recognise that 'women's economic empowerment can only be achieved by critically re-examining such norms and their impact' and through a concerted effort to put critical conditions (such as child care, flexibility in place and time of work) in place that allow families to effectively combine paid work and unpaid care work. We need a broader notion of economic empowerment that 'comprises both the market economy where women participate in the labour market, and the care economy which sustains and nurtures the market economy' (Chopra 2015). At the same time, we also need to focus on collective empowerment for economic justice that promotes gender equality – thereby necessitating a need to understand and work to change the macroeconomic factors affecting women's opportunities for economic empowerment.

### 1.2 Challenging social norms

Economic empowerment is one of three intertwined and essential components of empowerment – the other two being social and political empowerment, which often (but not always) go hand in hand with economic empowerment. Further, even when economic empowerment is considered as a key strategy in addressing gender inequality, the focus has been mostly on the individual women, with provision of loans, job quotas and government schemes. However, we know that by itself economic empowerment, especially of the individual woman, is not the sole solution to overcome traditional patriarchal gender norms and values. Policies aimed at achieving gender equitable development outcomes need to take into account and promote ways to reduce gender inequalities in social institutions (Branisa, Klasen and Ziegler 2013).

Sardenberg (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) impressively demonstrates how economic empowerment does not necessarily lead to a break in traditional gender roles. Following generations of families in a working class neighbourhood in Salvador for almost 20 years shows that traditional family ideals still prevail, even where women are economically independent and support each other. However, economic independence does give women the opportunity to leave abusive or avoid unsatisfying relationships altogether, thus contributing to **social empowerment**.



Social institutions, laws, norms, traditions, and codes of conduct have been shown to be ‘the most important single factor determining women’s participation in economic activities outside the household (Morrisson and Jütting 2005), as well as determining access to material and economic resources. Yet women’s unequal access to and representation by the most powerful institution – the state – is still proving to be an insurmountable challenge, necessitating a focus on political empowerment.

### 1.3 Changing power relations

**Empowerment as a political process** requires not only a change in power relations at the family and community levels, but also at societal level in terms of the recognition of the needs and rights of women on an equal footing to men. It also requires a change in gender equality policies of the state, posing a structural challenge to existing power relations. Htun and Weldon’s (2010) study examines the making of gender equality policies in 71 countries, putting forward a typology that draws data from three different types of policies – violence against women, abortion, and parental leave – each raising different challenges. These challenges arise from the societal structures within which these policies are being made, the type of issue that they seek to challenge (status vs class policies); and the social institution that these policies aim to challenge (doctrinal vs non-doctrinal issues). They find that the actors (such as women’s movements, religious organisations and Left parties) that are relevant in effecting change vary according to both the type of issue (whether the policy improves women’s lives or whether it addresses class inequalities amongst women) and whether it challenges the doctrine of a dominant religion or tradition/culture.

Evidence has shown that **women’s political participation** has positive impacts on child outcomes, the quality of governance and that generally, women invest more in development priorities of women (Duflo 2012; Beaman *et al.* 2006). Importantly, women’s participation in leadership positions exerts role model effects on younger generations (Beaman *et al.* 2012) that change aspirations and thus have in turn the power to (slowly) change gender roles over time. As one of the most visible active steps to encourage or visibly increase women’s political participation after the right to vote, quotas for women have been introduced in parliaments and local governments around the world. Tadros’ (2010) introduction to ‘Quotas – Add Women and Stir’ (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) offers a great reflection on quota and non-quota strategies to empower women. Several questions are raised, such as on the motivations behind increasing women’s political participation which would inherently feed back into the effectiveness and quality of their participation, for example whether they are given a platform and can take the opportunity to actively contribute and can make a difference to women’s rights and gender equality. Tadros also questions the positionality of the women who are brought into political positions. Another aspect to consider in terms of providing quotas for women is to understand whether quotas can and should be used as proxies for understanding governments’ commitments to gender equality. The issue of family support for women’s participation

in politics also becomes essential for women's political empowerment, especially as a lack of recognition of and support for their unpaid care work can inhibit women's participation.

#### 1.4 Addressing insecurities and structural violence

Any process of change creates and is propelled by ruptures in the current order, often symptomatised by reactions and pushbacks from the power-holders. A growing concern over the last decade has been **violence against women and girls**. This violence can be seen both as a reaction against processes that set out to change the existing gender relations, and as a way of maintaining the current social order that keeps women and girls in socially subordinate gender roles. Insecurities, even with varying degrees of severity, across time and space, shape processes of women's empowerment, for example through violence and insecurity during armed conflict and authoritarian rule; sanctioned forms of structural violence or insecurity backed by religious, cultural and customary practices and laws; cultural constructions of gender and sexuality; and everyday forms of insecurity such as domestic violence, any forms of harassment, and physical or verbal abuse (Hossain 2012).

However, in many instances, opposition and resistance to these different types of insecurities awaken and nourish powerful and effective individual and collective resistance and movements, which further the cause of empowerment of women (*ibid.*). Examples of changes, challenges and opportunities arising during and after armed conflict are given in Abdullah *et al.* (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*). Similar to accounts in many other countries that experienced violent conflict, women in Sierra Leone took on new political, economic and social roles during the conflict. However, opportunities created during that time have not been fully carried over into the post-conflict period, with women being marginalised in the peace process and political space, a persistent gender gap in the public sphere and positions of authority, and restricted access to productive and financial resources. Furthermore, the legacies of sexual violations during the war are still experienced by many women in post-conflict settings. With respect to structural violence, Uma Chakravarti's case studies (2008, this *IDS Bulletin*) emphasise women's constant exposure to institutionalised violence, and the role the state plays in perpetuating and facilitating violence. At the same time, the state can also play a critical role in furthering women's empowerment and fighting structural violence.

## 2 Conclusion

Even as women's empowerment remains a complex concept that defies precise definitions and easy measurements, its importance is widely accepted. This introductory article has shown some of the critical thinking and debates around the issue, reflecting on the interconnectedness of the economic, social and political components of empowerment. Casting an eye to the future, there seem to be two relevant debates that merit further unpacking – that of inequality, and the question of how the SDGs can contribute to furthering processes of women's empowerment and gender equality.

There has been an increasing focus on **inequality**, which is relevant to the concerns of women's empowerment in two significant ways. Firstly, these inequalities are experienced in different ways by women – in fact these experiences which stem also from intersecting elements of identities which include caste, class and race are perpetuated by the cross-cutting aspect of gender relations. Kabeer (1997, this *IDS Bulletin*) discusses not only the differential experiences of poverty, but also the 'kinds of claims and entitlements which women and men mobilise, the goals they prioritise and the forms of agency they can exercise in negotiating meanings and challenging distributions'.

Secondly, inequalities are themselves produced and reproduced through social norms, of which gender roles and social relations in a variety of sites and spaces (home, market, institutions, state) are critical. Gender roles and norms dictate amongst other things, the aspirations and expectations of boys and girls, the choices and opportunities available to different genders, for example the kinds of jobs and their wages available and accessible to them, and the differential access to intra-household resources. Gender roles and social relations dictate the types and level of participation of women in political and civic life. Access to education, health and social life is all mediated by gender roles and relations. These examples are reflective of the links and intersections between economic, political and social inequality on one side, and gender inequalities on the other side. Needless to say, women's empowerment is an important step towards reducing inequalities in the economic, social and political spheres.

There have been attempts to reduce inequalities in the gender arena through **international commitments** in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is significant that although the MDGs had a goal on gender quality and empowerment of women, the indicators for this goal were restricted to 'a very narrow definition of human capabilities as its vision and no reference to human rights' (Kabeer 2015b), thereby not being able to address the complex processes of tackling inequality and furthering empowerment. In practice, the achievement of the MDGs was slow, especially for the most vulnerable women, with their intersecting identities of gender, caste, class, race and ethnicity. Gita Sen (2013, this *IDS Bulletin*) takes stock of the extent to which MDG progress has reached women and girls. She outlines that although some progress has been made, women continue to face more poverty, lower rates of education, access to health services, equal pay for comparable work and lower political participation. Looking forward, the SDG's stand-alone goal on gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights, as well as the inclusion of gender concerns into other key goals, marks progress in the understanding and acceptance of the multifaceted nature of empowerment. Although a watered-down version of feminist demands, Goal 5 is positive in its incorporation of critical aspects such as recognition of care work; reduction of violence against women and girls in both private and public spaces; and enhancement of political, economic and public participation,

at the same time as recognition of women's rights over productive resources, amongst others. However, the focus on economic growth in the SDGs rather than redistribution of resources, and the inability to recognise reproductive and sexual health and rights in their entirety, is problematic for the holistic realisation of the empowerment agenda.

### 2.1 Opening spaces for women's empowerment

Looking ahead, Gita Sen (2013, this *IDS Bulletin*) calls for championing an 'issue-focused goal with people-focused targets' approach that addresses the dimensions of legal empowerment, political participation, access to economic resources, human development and social protection. It is important to understand empowerment of women and girls as a political and feminist re-visioning of the world (Chakravarti 2008, this *IDS Bulletin*), at the same time as providing enough space for women to redefine their identities and understand and work on the structures of power, rather than see empowerment as a technical process that the development industry can solve. Even with hard-won policies and laws promoting women's empowerment in place, Cornwall and Edwards (2010, this *IDS Bulletin*) bring to attention the struggles that implementation of these policies and laws entail. Further, they stress the contextual and contingent nature of empowerment processes that involve 'constant negotiation and compromise, with uncertain outcomes'.

The realisation of empowerment calls, therefore, for more attention to both the structural inequalities that women face, and the lived realities of challenging these. Empowerment is necessarily about expanding opportunities and acquiring the power to make choices – both in terms of what women can do, the menu of options available to them, and also about extending their imaginations about what they could do. For economic empowerment, this translates into expanding the choice of work – whether to undertake paid work, where to work, which sector to work – and negotiating the conditions of its payment/remuneration as well as work conditions and safety. This necessitates, therefore, a broader conception of economic empowerment beyond just labour force participation, to take into account the care economy, and providing support for recognition of women's unpaid care work, redistribution through public service provision, and reduction of the drudgery of this work. At the same time, social empowerment implies a recognition of, and working to expand the scope of familial and societal relationships within which women operate, and the way that women see themselves, rather than a focus on individual trajectories disconnected from their contexts. Political empowerment then, would include the choice of whether to participate in decision-making processes and structures, and expanding the conditions under which active participation of women takes place, i.e. women are able to influence both the agenda and outcomes towards promoting gender equity. Finally, along with addressing the structural aspects that restrict and slow down empowerment processes, it is critical to take into account women's own perspectives and decisions on empowerment processes and outcomes, including love, care, leisure, pleasure and relationships (Cornwall and Edwards 2010, this *IDS Bulletin*).

The articles chosen for this special Archive Collection demonstrate the depth and breadth of a nuanced analysis of empowerment that has come out of academic scholars writing at the cutting edge of this field. However, it needs to be noted that our policy tools and strategies have not matched this conceptual advancement, therefore leaving big gaps in policy and programming aimed at furthering processes and outcomes for women's empowerment. It is therefore critical to remember that empowerment – implying an expansion of opportunities and the power to make choices in the intertwined domains of economic, social and political aspects – can only be realised through a collective, rather than individualised notion of empowerment that focuses on addressing structural inequality and inequitable power relations, and gives primacy to women's agency in negotiating and challenging these structures.

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# Liberal vs. Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American Feminist Perspective on Conceptualising Women's Empowerment<sup>1</sup>

Cecília M.B. Sardenberg

## 1 Introduction

Since the early 1980s, feminists in Latin America have engaged in a range of programmes and activities aimed at promoting women's empowerment, but have yet to produce frameworks to analyse this process at work. Tracing and reflecting upon the impressive advancements of feminist activism throughout the region has been a major focus for feminist analysis (Sternbach *et al.* 1992; Lavrin 1998). However, little thinking has gone into depicting how the flow of power/empowerment travels between individuals, groups and institutions, and thus towards linking gains at the macro-institutional level with real changes in the everyday lives of women in different social contexts. Feminist thinking in the region still lacks concerted analysis of the linkages and discontinuities between individual agency, collective action and structural transformation, and how they operate in the process of women's empowerment and the eradication of patriarchal domination.

Although 'empowerment' (*empoderamento*) is a term considered new and foreign in Brazil, it has come to be as widely used and to carry as many different meanings as in English. This constitutes a major difficulty in working with this concept. As Srilatha Batliwala notes: 'It is one of the most loosely used terms in the development lexicon, meaning different things to different people – or, more dangerously, all things to all people' (1994: 1). As a consequence, there is a lot of mistrust in relation to empowerment on the part of Latin American feminists, as the term has been appropriated by

mainstream organisations and by governments to legitimise policies and practices that, from a feminist perspective, are far from empowering for women. The notion of empowerment that has been propagated by mainstream development agencies and organisations differs considerably from its original meaning in feminist thinking. There are ambivalences, contradictions and paradoxes in the uses of the concept, as it is often used as a substitute to integration, participation, identity, development and planning, and hardly ever in reference to its emancipating origins (León 1997). In this article, I reflect on different ways of defining and conceiving women's empowerment from a Latin American feminist perspective.

## 2 Feminism, power and empowerment

Teresa de Lauretis argues that 'there is no real boundary between feminism and what is external to it; no boundary separates or insulates feminism from other social practices or makes it impervious to the institutions of civil society' (1986: 4). Just as feminist-coined concepts, such as 'gender' for instance, have been appropriated and re-signified in development discourse (Cornwall *et al.* 2007), so too development agendas and concepts have permeated feminist thinking about women's empowerment, making it difficult to disentangle the two.

Nevertheless, I argue that it is possible to distinguish two basic approaches in conceptualising women's empowerment. The first, which I will identify as the 'liberal empowerment' approach, regards women's empowerment as an instrument for development

priorities, be they eradicating poverty or building democracy. Consistent with liberal ideals, the focus is on individual growth, but in an atomistic perspective, that is, on the notion of the rational action of social actors based on individual interests (Romano 2002). It is an approach that de-politicises the process of empowerment by taking power out of the equation. Instead, the focus is on technical and instrumental aspects that can supposedly be 'taught' in special training courses, for example.

In contrast, in the other approach – which I will call 'liberating empowerment' – power relations are the central issue. Women's empowerment is regarded as both on 'intrinsic grounds' (Kabeer 1999), as the process by which women attain autonomy and self-determination, as well as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy, a means and an end in itself. Thus, although feminists also aspire to end poverty, wars, and build democratic states, in this feminist perspective the major objective of women's empowerment is to question, destabilise and, eventually, transform the gender order of patriarchal domination. Such an approach is consistent with a focus on women's organising, on collective action, though not disregarding the importance of the empowerment of women at a personal level.

Power is central to any conceptualisations of empowerment, and is at the very root of the term itself. Understandings of power and empowerment come from very different movements and traditions, being appropriated and re-signified by agencies and organisations that do not necessarily take the interests of these movements to heart (Oxaal and Baden 1997: 1). Besides, even within these different movements and traditions, the notions of power that underpin approaches and actions have changed significantly over time. For the purposes of this article perhaps one of the most useful understandings of power is the notion of 'power as empowerment' as recognised by Amy Allen (2005, 1999), one which she argues has developed as a result of the shortcomings of the 'power as resource' and 'power as domination' approaches in dealing with the power women are able to exercise even in a society dominated by a patriarchal order. In her words:

Feminists who conceptualize power as empowerment do of course acknowledge that, in patriarchal societies, men are in a position of

dominance over women; but they choose to focus on a different understanding of power: power as the ability to empower and transform oneself, others, and the world. (Allen 1999: 18)

This view of empowerment is as a process by which people begin 'making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out' (Mosedale 2005: 244). Feminists who conceptualise empowerment in this way argue that to be empowered 'one must have been disempowered' as women have as a group, and that 'empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party', although it is possible to act as 'facilitator' of this process. Indeed, Srilatha Batliwala proposes that women's empowerment involves challenging patriarchal relations, which in turn requires that women first 'recognize the ideology that legitimizes male domination and understand how it perpetuates their oppression' (1994: 131). She further notes that this process of change does not necessarily 'begin spontaneously from the condition of subjugation'; it must be 'externally induced'. As she claims: 'Women must be convinced of their innate right to equality, dignity and justice' (Batliwala 1994: 132). Women's organisations play a fundamental role in bringing women together for their mutual empowerment.

Along with other feminists from the South (Léon 2001, for example), Batliwala claims that the concept of 'empowerment' thus conceived is a contribution from so-called 'Third World' feminists. More specifically, they see it as emerging as part of the debates and critiques of 'Third World' feminists and their attempts to articulate feminist thinking with the principles of popular education (Batliwala 1994). They also recognise the contribution of Gramsci's thoughts, particularly in relation to the importance of devising participatory mechanisms for the construction of more equitable and non-exploitative institutions. Yet, other feminists from the South (for instance, Bruera and González 2006: 69) suggest that the term was first used in the 1960s in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, before being appropriated by feminists in the 1980s. 'Liberating' empowerment is also in line with the basic notions of the consciousness-raising groups of Second Wave Western feminisms, which started in the mid-1960s, providing form and content to the political-pedagogical work developed by popular educators (Sardenberg 2005).

Although the concept of empowerment has these roots, feminists started to use it actively only in the mid-1980s (Batiwala 1994). A particularly significant document was published in 1987 by DAWN (Development Alternatives for a New Era), *Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions* by Gita Sen and Caren Grown, which was distributed by DAWN at workshops in the NGO Forum in Nairobi that was held during the Third World Conference on Women in 1985, in which close to 15,000 women participated. Sen and Grown formulated alternative proposals for change, bringing forth a vision of women's empowerment based on collective action. They stressed that the road toward women's empowerment had to be paved through structural transformation, through actions that promoted radical changes in the institutions of patriarchal domination. They emphasised that women's empowerment must be thought and acted upon not only in terms of gender inequalities, but also in terms of inequalities of class, race, ethnicity and other social determinants among women, as well as of the unequal position of North and South in the global arena.

Yet while the concept of 'empowerment' came to be taken up by feminists seeking to bring about more equitable development, it also lent itself to appropriation – or indeed misappropriation (Pereira, this *IDS Bulletin*) – by the development establishment. Indeed, in a provocative article, Ann Ferguson (2004) asks 'can development create empowerment and women's liberation?' And she observes that 'as a general goal, empowerment has been described as a political and a material process which increases individual and group power, self-reliance and strength' (2004: 1). However, she argues, 'there are two ways to define empowerment'. The first, associated here with 'liberal empowerment', defines empowerment as a process that individuals engage in to have access to resources so as to achieve outcomes in their self-interest. In this perspective, Ferguson emphasises, it seems that 'economic, legal and personal changes would be sufficient for individuals to become empowered, and such a process does not require the political organization of collectives in which such individuals are located.'

In Ferguson's view, the other way of thinking about empowerment, 'more influenced by empowerment as a goal of radical social movements, emphasizes the increased material and personal power that

comes about when groups of people organize themselves to challenge the status quo through some kind of self-organization of the group' (2004: 1). This understanding of empowerment corresponds to what is regarded in this article as 'liberating empowerment', a perspective that is shared by most Latin American feminists who address issues of power/empowerment.

In what follows, I will examine 'liberal' and 'liberating' empowerment in turn, and look at their implications for feminist praxis.

### 3 Liberal empowerment

Liberal empowerment has its origins in liberalism, but also in liberal feminism's claim for equality and equal opportunities for women.<sup>2</sup> While we may all agree with this claim for equality, it must be remembered that liberalism is not only associated with a political theory centred on notions of individual liberty, individual rights, and equal opportunity but also with neoclassical economics. It is the application of these economic theories in neoliberalism that has produced views and policies regarding the demands of the market for structural adjustment, privatisation, downsizing of the state and all of its consequences, which have been so vigorously criticised by Latin American and other feminists from the South.

Liberal feminist thinking has characteristically underlined much of development discourse and practice, particularly as espoused by bilateral agencies. Liberal feminist critiques of mainstream development led to the development of what came to be known as the WID approach, 'Women in Development' (Kabeer 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995). This approach sought to extend equal opportunities in development for women, by overcoming these social and cultural barriers through reform and providing equal access to women in education and training. However, it ignored the structures of patriarchal dominance that underlined inequalities between women and men, as well as class, race, ethnicity and other social determinants responsible for the inequalities among women. Nor did it question the underlying assumptions of the model of development into which it deemed to integrate women. 'It was not the mainstream model of modernization that was under attack, but the fact that women had not benefited from it' (Kabeer 1994: 20).

During the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–85), feminist and women's movements emerged throughout the world, independently of WID efforts. They gained strength in the South through women organising at the grassroots level around a number of different issues, but having as their ultimate goal the empowerment of women, even if not spelled out precisely in these terms. Thus, it was not surprising that the critique of the WID approach came most strongly from feminists from the South, as formulated in the document (Sen and Grown 1987). This critique built on new developments in feminist theorising in the North, which departed fundamentally from liberal feminist thinking and emphasised the social construction of gender and the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. By 1995, when the Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing, a new development discourse for women was being formulated, influenced by the development of an alternative approach, which came to be termed Gender and Development, or GAD. This approach emphasised power relations and structural inequalities, rooting analysis and action in conceptualising gender relations as socially constituted relations between women and men.

The focus shifted from integrating women into development to addressing issues of women's subordination through a focus on transforming gender relations (Razavi and Miller 1995). The Beijing Platform of Action, approved during the Fourth World Conference, incorporated this new perspective, as well as a discourse on women's empowerment. This had a widespread effect on the development 'machinery', as bilateral agencies and other organisations were to follow the adoption of this new term. By 2005, for example, 'more than 1,800 projects in the World Bank's lending portfolio mentioned empowerment in their project documentation' (Alsop *et al.* 2006: 1). Alsop *et al.* define empowerment as 'the process of enhancing an individual's or [a] group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes' (2006: 1). As I go on to discuss, this way of framing empowerment neglects fundamental questions of power.

Zabala (2006) shows the profound structural limits to the World Bank pursuing gender equity and women's empowerment in their projects. She contends:

These structural limits have two aspects that can be differentiated. On the one hand, the

economistic vision promoted by the institution, that constitutes the nuclei of its theoretical thinking, does not favour these objectives and, on the other hand, its internal organisation and functioning is equally unfavourable. The existence of these structural limitations mark the possibilities and incoherences presented by the institution in working with gender issues. (2006: 31, my translation from the original in Spanish)

Of course, concepts and approaches cannot be easily transplanted from one conceptual framework into another that is radically different from the original one without suffering semantic changes. Without a significant change in their sustaining models, therefore, development agencies merely adopt the term 'empowerment' and not the approach it originally entailed. Transplanted into the liberal framework of modernisation theory, the notion of empowerment elaborated by feminists from the South could not survive as a transformative, revolutionary concept. Instead, what is observed is its use in a process of transformism, as explained by Jorge Romano:

... the empowerment evoked by banks and multilateral and bilateral development agencies, by different governments, and also by NGOs, has often been used primarily as an instrument of legitimation for them to continue doing, in essence, what they have always done. But now with a new name: empowerment. Or to control, within the parameters they themselves established, the potential of change originally impressed in these innovating categories and proposals. A typical situation of transformism (*gattopardismo*): to appropriate and distort the new, to guarantee the continuity of dominant practices. Adapting to the new times, changing 'everything' so as to change nothing. (Romano 2002: 10, my translation from the original in Portuguese)

Despite emerging in feminist thinking as a critique of liberal notions of power, the concept of empowerment has been appropriated in this fashion in development discourse, legitimising practices that have little to do with the original concept developed by feminists from the South.

Analysing this appropriation of empowerment from a Foucauldian perspective, Ferguson argues that this

implies the creation of a new development rationality. As she observes, it is no longer 'acceptable to describe the Third World clients/recipients of the training or enabling practices called empowerment practices as "illiterate", "disenfranchised", "backward" or "exploited"'. To the contrary, it is now important to describe them as: "rational economic agents", "global citizens", potential "entrepreneurs". Development should then 'empower' them so that they can 'act as good entrepreneurs, wage earners, and consumers, that is, as proper "subjects/objects" of development' (2004: 7).

Obviously, this notion of 'liberal' empowerment actually fosters 'empowerment without power' in that it gives no space for changes in the existing power relations, nor in the structures of domination that are responsible for exclusion, poverty and disempowerment in the first place (Romano 2002). This results in diluted empowerment (or 'decaff' empowerment), as in the World Bank approach, which focuses on access to information, inclusion and participation, accountability and local organisational capacity, but does not discuss why some groups are excluded and do not have access to information, thus ignoring the structures of power that underscore the observed situation of exclusion and 'disempowerment' in the first place.

A consequence of ignoring these structures is to be found in the notion, held by liberal empowerment approaches, that empowerment is essentially a 'neutral' process, or that it is possible to have 'empowerment without conflicts'. This is based on the view that empowerment is an 'apolitical' process, or that the redistribution of resources can proceed without conflicts, or that the emerging conflicts can be 'technically resolved'. An example of this view is to be found in the 'harmonic model of partnership' that creates and maintains an illusion of consensus amongst stakeholders, and which is an important part of the World Bank hegemonic project (see Brock *et al.* 2001: 21). However, empowerment is not a technique to achieve progress without conflicts. If empowerment means changes in relations of domination, it cannot be neutral – it will engender conflict.

Moreover, empowerment is conceptualised in liberal empowerment as a 'gift', or as something that can be 'donated' or 'distributed'. This emerges from the major focus being on greater access to external resources,

goods and services as a means of empowerment, rather than on the process of group organising and the building of self-esteem and trust as part of this process. This is an omission that also comes from a narrow view of participation. The tendency is thus to view empowerment as a technique to learn in special courses. The social and political dimensions of empowerment become reduced to technical and instrumental questions, as 'methodologies for empowerment', as kits one can buy and sell. It is no longer based on the exchange of experiences and the collective reflection upon them for change.

Jorge Romano's (2002) critique of this notion of empowerment calls attention to the problem of the over-politicisation and atomisation of empowerment, two distinct, actually opposite tendencies, but that present equally dangerous risks in the popularisation and generalisation of empowerment. In the first case, there is an overemphasis on the collective aspects of empowerment, with neglect of the individual elements. In the latter cases, the atomisation of empowerment, characteristic of liberal empowerment perspectives, are the tendencies to depoliticisation, fragmentation, and atomisation of situations of domination, created by the advancement of neoliberalism and the over-valorisation of individuality.

Indeed, as a rule, the kind of empowerment promoted by bilateral agencies and development banks is based on a notion of the rational action of actors towards individual interests. The focus is on changing individuals, even when working on group organising. This is not to say that the individual is not important. To the contrary, even when changes in the consciousness of domination are catalysed in group processes, it is always a personal and individual experience. However, as León (2001: 97) observes, it is necessary to distinguish this notion from an individualist view of the process:

One of the fundamental contradictions in the uses of the term 'empowerment' is expressed in the debate between individual and collective empowerment. For those who use the concept in the individual perspective, emphasising cognitive processes, empowerment is circumscribed to the meaning that individuals confer to themselves. It takes the sense of individual control, self-control. It is 'doing things by oneself', 'achieving success without the help of others'. This is an individualist view that gives priority to independent and

autonomous actors, with a sense of self-control, and that ignores the links between power structures and everyday practises of individuals and groups, besides disconnecting people from the wider social, political and historical contexts, and of what solidarity, cooperation and being concerned for the other represent.  
(My translation from the original in Spanish).

Despite these shortcomings, a number of projects and programmes in Latin America claim that they have been successful in 'empowering' women. For example, a study of NGOs working with poor women in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, shows that by offering training in professional skills (e.g. sewing, handicrafts), and talks about issues such as women's constitutional rights, violence against women and sexual and reproductive rights, some positive results have been obtained (Ckagnazaroff *et al.* 2006). There is a boost in women's self-esteem, they begin to learn more about their rights and to denounce domestic violence. Although this is an 'assistentialist' means to women's empowerment, it brings women together to discuss problems that they experience in similar ways, thus creating a space for women that could lead to consciousness-raising and collective action in the direction of 'liberating empowerment'.

#### 4 Liberating empowerment

In mainstream development discourse, it seems clear that the empowerment of women is seen primarily as an instrument in poverty reduction and other development goals, even if women's empowerment makes an appearance in the Millennium Development Goals. For feminists of all walks, however, the empowerment of women is a goal in itself. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, what is conceptualised as empowerment, and how one should go about promoting it so that it can be a real 'liberating' force, are clearly debatable issues in feminist thinking.

A number of feminists sustain the notion, proposed by Kabeer (1999: 435), that empowerment is the process 'by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability'. For Kabeer, this ability, in turn, rests on three distinct yet interrelated dimensions: (a) 'resources', pertaining to the existing pre-conditions; (b) 'agency', defined as 'power to', or as people's capacity to define and pursue their strategic choices despite possible opposition; and (c) 'achievements', the

outcomes of one's exercise of their 'power to' capacity. Yet, Kabeer warns us that the 'conditions of choice' as well as the 'consequences of choice' are always shaped by context, and thus do not necessarily have 'transformatory significance', i.e. 'the extent to which the outcomes resulting from women exercising their choices have the potential to challenge and destabilise social inequalities or merely express or reproduce these inequalities' (Kabeer 1999: 461).

Although I agree with Kabeer that at the individual level, we may think of empowerment in those general terms, they do not allow us to discriminate between interventions aimed at enhancing women's resources, i.e. between those that simply sustain women in poverty or make a few women rich, and those that genuinely reduce inequality. They also do not make it possible for us to distinguish between uses of agency, whether for eradicating patriarchy or sustaining it, and thus, of thinking in terms of the transformatory significance of women's agency.

Perhaps because these issues are not clarified, a pared away version of Kabeer's model has been appropriated by the World Bank to support their efforts in transforming poor women into poor entrepreneurs. It is hardly surprising that in the process Kabeer's emphases are muted, or indeed lost altogether. Significantly, Kabeer (1999) strongly emphasises that in order to bring transformative changes, women's empowerment is dependent on collective solidarity and action.

In a later paper, Kabeer (2005) takes these considerations into greater account, qualifying the exercise of 'agency' in which feminists are interested: '...in transformative forms of agency that do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy' (2005: 16). In accordance with this perspective, therefore, we must think of ways of conceptualising empowerment towards women's liberation, beginning then, not just with individual women, but with women in the collective struggle for transformation. The strategy of consciousness-raising promotes the development of critical capacity for questioning and for the launching of collective action that can bring change. This is consonant with Stromquist's observations in regard to group participation and collective identity being mutually reinforcing: 'a person must first become



part of some collective group to develop a collective identity; but, developing a sense of collective identity also leads women to mobilize' (2002: 32). This process involves the development of 'power with', a notion implicit in 'consciousness-raising' as a means of 'empowerment', and thus as a political strategy for change.

The notion that liberating empowerment implies a process of conscientisation, raises questions not only in regard to the sociopolitical dimensions of the phenomenon, but also to the psychological processes at play. It becomes important to understand 'how individuals come to understand the political dimensions of their personal problems and act accordingly' (Carr 2003: 9). As Batliwala rightly points out, the process of empowerment does not follow a linear course, instead, it unrolls in a spiral form, as the individuals involved act upon '...changing consciousness, identifying areas to target for change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analyzing action and outcomes, which leads into higher levels of consciousness and more finely honed and better executed strategies' (2002: 132).

Needless to say, this process does not unravel without conflict. To the contrary, as Romano (2002: 18) emphasises, empowerment is both a relational as well as a conflicting and contentious process. It is relational because it always involves 'links with other actors', and the power relations in which a given person is involved. Furthermore, the empowerment process is about a change in the structuring of these relations, in an individual as well as a group level, and thus cannot proceed without conflict. Indeed, conflict and coalition must be considered as part of the process of liberating empowerment, particularly when thinking in terms of 'women's empowerment'.

Ferguson (2004) suggests that if we consider these different sources of social oppression as intersecting each other rather than being 'merely additive', then it becomes impossible to separate them; one cannot detach gender identity from other bases of identity (and interests), such as class and race. This means that we cannot talk about women having common political interests, a notion that empties the women's movement of its social base. Ferguson also finds the suggestion that we should then assume a 'strategic essentialism' in thinking of women as a social group as questionable. She asks: 'can we assume women as a social group have common interests?' (2004: 2).

Yet, as Ferguson further observes, we can redefine interests by thinking in terms of 'formal interests' and 'content interests', along the lines proposed by Jonasdottir who takes a historical approach to this concept (in Ferguson 2004). Putting it simply, we may say that 'formal interests' would pertain to certain principles and interests that all members of a given broad social group agree upon, whereas 'content interests' refers to the specific ways in which they would apply to differently situated segments in the broader group. For example, Ferguson suggests that a formal common interest that women share is reproductive rights that are acknowledged and defended by the state in which they live; this neither implies that all women need or desire to exercise these rights, or that they have the same resources to do so, but that it would benefit all women to have access to reproductive choice. Ferguson further argues that these formal interests may be fostered on broader social justice coalition seeking 'democratic control over crucial material and non-material resources for other dispossessed social subjects, including men'. She thus concludes her argument by stating that there are two conditions for the emergence of a liberating empowerment process. The first such condition is the existence of an 'indigenous social movement' or one that 'involves some form of participatory democracy which gives it legitimacy to those it claims to speak for'. The second condition is the existence of means for negotiation of conflicts of interest between individuals and groups in the movement, particularly through coalitions of solidarity (Ferguson 2004: 8).

Clearly, then, differences and inequalities among women must be considered, for, some individuals may have power over others in a given group on the basis of class, race, etc, such that 'empowerment' may benefit some at the expense of others in the group. In such circumstances, therefore, liberating empowerment will only be possible if one approaches the issues from the standpoint of the women located in the most disadvantaged intersections. Indeed, this was precisely the strategy that was at play in the formulation of the Feminist Political Platform, presented by Brazilian feminists to presidential candidates in the 2002 elections, and, again, in the formulation of the basic principles for the 2004 and 2007 Action Plans for Women (Sardenberg 2005).

## 5 Conclusion: practising liberating empowerment in Latin America

Magdalena León (2001) has argued that Latin American feminists have not been keen on discussing issues of power, because they (we) could only think of the question in terms of a 'power over' model. It was only after the Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano y del Caribe (Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encounters) was held in Mexico City in 1987, that they (we) began to recognise the possibility of other forms and models of power and thus consider processes of women's empowerment. But despite the absence of the term 'empowerment' in Latin American feminist discourse and a certain discomfort, if not mistrust, that continues to be associated with it, 'liberating empowerment' has been at work in the region since at least the late 1970s, when the first 'action and reflection' women's groups were created (Lavrin 1998). Building on a feminist critique of Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed' (1987), and negotiating coalitions among different movements, several of these groups developed into organisations offering special programmes geared to creating the conditions for the empowerment of women of all different standings and regions (see, for example, Thayer

2000). Despite differences and inequalities, strong coalitions have been articulated, within and between Latin American countries, in order to advocate and promote change in favour of women. This process of negotiating conflicts and articulating coalitions has also been deeply empowering in a liberating way to the women involved.

This approach to women's empowerment has certainly been of consequence to bringing institutional changes regarding gender relations, such as the important advancements registered in several Latin American countries within the last decade in the way of new legislation and 'machinery' to combat domestic violence (CLADEM/UNIFEM 2003). These gains are relevant to all women, regardless of their particular standing. In contrast, liberal empowerment approaches have only benefited a handful of women, and even then only in a very individualistic manner. It is no wonder Latin American feminists have not only been critical of these 'decaff' empowerment approaches, but continue to invest their efforts in programmes that promote 'consciousness-raising' and define the eradication of the immense social inequalities among women as a major goal of women's empowerment.

## Notes

- 1 This paper was presented at the Reclaiming Feminism, Gender and NeoLiberalism conference held at the Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK, 9–10 July 2007. A previous version of this paper was presented at the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme

Consortium Inception Workshop, Luxor, Egypt in September 2006. I would like to thank Andrea Cornwall, Jasmine Gideon and Jenny Edwards for their help in shaping this version into a publishable article.

- 2 For a discussion of the different perspectives within Liberal Feminisms, see Baehr (2007).

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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## 1 Introduction

This article takes up the theme of 'gender and poverty', but looks at it from the vantage point of women living in an increasingly opulent setting. The case study comes from a small rural community in south-eastern Iran. The selected region has some distinct features which make it interesting for exploring this particular conjunction of social forces: relative opulence generated through agricultural export earnings, on the one hand, and powerful gender discriminatory relations sanctioned by local custom and reinforced through state policy, on the other. The article will explore the contradictory implications that the rising levels of household income have had for women. It does so by using two different, but related, ways of capturing how women have fared in the context of these socio-economic changes.

First, defining poverty/well-being as a 'state of being or doing' (as in Sen's 'functionings'), we look at gender differentials in well-being indicators. In this context we focus on some of the most extreme forms of deprivation – infant and child mortality – to see if they reflect gender bias in parental care, as one might expect from the geographical distribution of masculine sex ratios. Although it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about changes in discriminatory practices on the basis of time-series trends in mortality sex ratios, we offer some tentative explanations for the observed patterns.

We then explore issues of vulnerability which are highlighted in women's own accounts of well-being. Vulnerability here refers to the complex bundles of risk that are hemming women in, making them more dependent on male incomes: the weakening of women's independent economic sphere; the withdrawal of female labour from farm work; and their forced reliance on a labour market that is highly segmented and discriminatory. In many ways these changes seem to add up to a deterioration in women's 'fall back position'. However, in response we also find a series of coping strategies through which women seek to make their lives more secure – demanding a share of the family legacy (land); demanding remuneration for their labour obligations within marriage; and a tendency to invest their wages in assets that are less vulnerable to male predation.

# From Rags to Riches

## *Looking at Poverty from a Gender Perspective*

**Shahra Razavi**

IDS Bulletin Vol 28 No 3 1997



Although it is difficult to generalise from the experience documented in this case study, some of our findings may have wider relevance. Strategies for increasing rural incomes may entail a number of unforeseen negative consequences for women. The specific ways in which these macro-policies affect women depend on a variety of factors, amongst them the growth trajectory, the various institutions which mediate the benefits of growth (markets, the state), and the pre-existing gender relations. In the case study documented in this paper, for example, 'underemployment' rather than 'overemployment' seems to be the critical gender issue that is emerging.<sup>1</sup>

The article also draws attention to the relative strengths and weaknesses of 'objective' measures of well-being. While well-being indicators (measured directly on the individual) are more conducive to obtaining a gender-differentiated picture of deprivation than are household-based measures (as in the poverty line approach), they are nevertheless limited in the extent to which they can capture different aspects of gender discrimination. Some of these limitations are highlighted in this paper by drawing on women's own accounts of well-being which focus on issues of vulnerability and security within marriage. As we see below, the way in which the concept of vulnerability is used here differs in several respects from its usage in the mainstream literature and highlights some of the ways in which the concept has to be reformulated if gender is to be brought in as a core concern.

## 2 Opulence and Well-Being: The National Context

The study region is set within a country which, by standard opulence criteria, is considered to be 'middle-income'. Some of this wealth at least seems to be contributing to the achievement of basic needs. With an average life expectancy of almost 68 years, an infant mortality rate of 25 per 1,000, and an adult literacy rate of 65 per cent, Iran ranks amongst the 'medium human development'

achievers (UNDP 1995). A critical factor in this process seems to have been Iranian state policy which in the post-1979 period has identified the improvement of basic needs as one of its main priorities.<sup>2</sup> Over a period of almost 15 years infant mortality has dropped from 104 per 1,000 to 25 per 1,000; life expectancy has risen from 55 to 68 years. Literacy rates over the same period have gone from under half to around two-thirds, and are still rising; the gap between urban and rural literacy is closing; and rural infrastructure – safe drinking water, electricity and roads – has been significantly improved (*The Economist*, 18 January 1997). Even though the rationing system which was put in place during the Iran-Iraq war has now virtually ceased to exist, universal state subsidies on bread, fuel, medicine and other basic necessities continue to shield the population from the vagaries of market forces unleashed by Iran's liberalisation and restructuring programs (albeit without IMF loans).

Cross-cutting, and potentially off-setting some of the benefits of these economic and social policies, are a set of powerful gender relations which are institutionalised within the household and the market, and reinforced through state policies. Falling within the so-called classic belt of 'patriarchy-patriliny-patrilocality', the typical Iranian household is a corporate entity with women's economic independence and personal autonomy highly circumscribed. Hand in hand with the more benign social and economic policies noted above, state presence of a more ambiguous kind has tended to reinforce these gender-based restrictions. The schools, the mosques, the mass media and various revolutionary organs convey messages about 'propriety' and 'decency', backed by powerful sanctions (including force where necessary), which serve to preserve and reinforce men's privileged position within conjugal and gender relations. Symbolising the entry of the urban Islamic culture into the rural milieu – which has been historically more lax about women's physical mobility and attire – is the black veil (*chador*) that increasingly adorns school girls and young women.

<sup>1</sup> In the context of export promotion in many African rural economies, in contrast, an important gender issue appears to be women's increasing work loads (e.g. Uganda Women's Network 1995; Palmer 1991).

<sup>2</sup> The state commitment to improving basic needs was no

doubt an outcome of the revolutionary process that brought the Islamic regime to power. As many have argued, the Islamic Republic itself is a highly eclectic entity which combines traditionalist elements of shi'i Islam with aspects of Third World populism and state socialism (Abrahamian 1993).

Looking more closely at the Rafsanjan district, the first point to note is that as the main producer of Iran's leading export crop (pistachio), it ranks amongst the most affluent regions in the country. While commercial relations have had a long history in this region, since the mid-1960s a number of factors (state policies, water shortages) have hastened the transition from semi-subsistence agriculture into full-scale cash cropping so that by the early 1980s most of the villages in the Rafsanjan basin produced nothing but pistachio. At the same time the persistence of a hierarchical class structure – where the descendants of the absentee landlords still own a significant proportion of the region's land and water resources – has meant that the export earnings are very unequally divided. Yet a number of social changes – some of them sanctioned by the state – have served to reduce class inequality.

Irrigation technology – which prior to 1979 was the preserve of the rural elite – has become more widely accessible; this has led to the emergence of a small strata of rich peasants (some of whom are politically connected to the state), and a labour force that is marginally landed ('garden owners'). More importantly though as far as the landless and the land-poor are concerned, the landlord-peasant relations have undergone a qualitative sea-change; a more enlightened style of capitalism has replaced the archaic 'feudal' relations of domination. A progressive Labour Code backed by state sanction has obliged the absentee owners of large-scale pistachio farms to provide their attached male labourers with a wage that is above the national minimum wage, health insurance, paid holidays, and compensation in case of unfair dismissal.<sup>3</sup> The labour market nevertheless remains rigidly segmented, and the labour relations within the female segments bear no resemblance to the favourable conditions that prevail in some male segments of the market (more on this later).

The general point raised above about state presence certainly applies to the study villages. On the one hand, this has been reflected in the development of rural infrastructure; most villages in the district now have piped water and electricity, paved roads, primary schools and access to state-funded mobile

immunisation units. At the same time, the very structures that have brought 'development' to these remote villages – schools, roads, electricity (television) – also serve as a conduit for state propaganda and control. The dominant household model, and the symbols and social norms that accompany it, legitimise male advantage within the conjugal contract, redefine the concepts of gendered space, and tighten the female segments within the labour market. Moreover, the failure to recognise women as independent persons means that state efforts to distribute assets (land, water) more fairly and to protect the rights of agricultural workers completely by-pass women.

### 3 The Strengths and Limitations of Well-Being Indicators

There has been much debate on the gender biases that imbue measurements of poverty. As many have argued, using human development indicators (as opposed to opulence criteria such as income), is preferable not only for drawing attention to the actual realisation of basic needs (as opposed to the potential value of income in achieving those needs), but also because it is less prone to gender bias as it is measured directly on the individual (Kabeer 1996). Moreover, 'objective' indicators of well-being are not subject to the same cultural biases that are likely to affect people's self-perceptions of well-being – a bias that is particularly acute in the case of women (Sen 1987). For all these reasons gender differentials in infant and child death rates can capture an important dimension of relative female deprivation. Do the Iranian mortality figures conform to the pattern emerging from other parts of the patriarchal belt (Pakistan, North India, Bangladesh) where significant social factors outweigh and reverse the pattern that is expected on the basis of biological sex differentials in life chances?

Unfortunately, the Iranian vital statistics obtained through large-scale sample surveys are quite old (SCI 1978). As one might expect, however, they indicate a significant degree of female disadvantage in early age survivorship, which is particularly acute during infancy (m/f ratio of 0.91) and early childhood (m/f ratio of 0.8). To put the picture of

<sup>3</sup> To escape the requirements of the Labour Code, the capitalist owners increasingly resort to hiring Afghani

labourers who, as refugees, are not entitled to the same rights as Iranian workers.

**Table 1: Infant and Child Mortality Rates  
for the Interval between 1 month and 5 years  
in Rafsanjan, Iran (number of live births)**

Women's Age Group	Infant and Child Mortality Rates (a)			M/F
15-34	Male	40	(267)	1.08
	Female	37	(246)	
	Both	39	(518)	
35-39	Male	100	(100)	0.89
	Female	112	(98)	
	Both	106	(198)	
40-44	Male	98	(92)	0.64
	Female	153	(85)	
	Both	124	(177)	
45-49	Male	110*	(109)	0.41
	Female	267*	(120)	
	Both	192	(229)	
50-54	Male	145	(117)	0.65
	Female	224	(76)	
	Both	176	(193)	
55-59	Male	243	(74)	1.25
	Female	194	(67)	
	Both	220	(141)	
15-59	Male	101*	(690)	0.74
	Female	137*	(625)	
	Both	118	(1315)	

(a) Per 1,000 live births

\* The mortality ratios for males and females are significantly different from each other at 95 per cent confidence.

relative female deprivation in perspective, it would be useful to compare the Iranian figures with their Indian equivalents. While the Indian mortality ratios during the same period (1976–1978) were feminine too – for both infants and young children – the extent of female disadvantage was marginally less pronounced in India than in Iran. This is quite a significant point, given that the Indian ratios are themselves highly ‘perverse’ by international standards. While recent national figures for infant mortality in Iran indicate a significant improvement in

infant survivorship, we have little information on the relative life chances of girls and boys. Our village level data<sup>4</sup> provides some clues on the possible trends.

A somewhat similar picture of relative female deprivation emerges from our village-level data, which was based on the fertility histories of all ever-married women (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup> The cumulative results for infant and child mortality (based on deaths between one month and 5 years) show female

<sup>4</sup> The field research was carried out between September 1988 and August 1989 as part of the author's DPhil thesis (Razavi 1992).

<sup>5</sup> The mortality rates were based on the fertility histories of women aged 15–59 years; women in older age groups (59 years plus) were excluded due to possible memory lapses.

mortality to be 26 per cent higher than male mortality (m/f ratio of 0.74). The extent of female disadvantage reflected in the data set thus seems to be even more pronounced than in the national survey data noted above.

The South Asian literature on excess female mortality has identified both proximate determinants (sex bias in food intake and in access to health care) and underlying causes ('economic' and 'cultural' under-valuation of women) in order to explain these mortality differentials.<sup>6</sup> As far as the proximate mechanisms are concerned, in the study region we have found a number of health beliefs and customs which are suggestive of gender bias in parental care. Although it is difficult to establish direct causality between these health beliefs and the observed sex differentials in mortality, it would not be unreasonable to assume that they have an impact on the observed mortality patterns.<sup>7</sup> However it should also be noted that our village-level evidence does not indicate any demographic manipulation of the kind documented by Monica Das Gupta (1987) in the case of Punjab, where specific categories of daughters are consciously neglected.<sup>8</sup> The excess mortality of female infants and children in Rafsanjan is thus likely to be the outcome of generalised neglect rather than selective discrimination.<sup>9</sup> In other words parents seem to have internalised certain norms that lead them to give better care to their sons than to their daughters, so that excess female mortality is an unintended consequence.

How can we explain the under-valuation of females which is ultimately responsible for truncating the survival chances of young females? Many of the

factors that have been implicated in the Indian debate – women's low rates of labour participation, their tenuous inheritance rights, their low social status and limited autonomy within marriage – can also explain son preference in the Iranian context (although dowry is not an issue in Iran). However, while it seems reasonable to explain excess female mortality in terms of patriarchal gender relations, it is dangerous to rely on mortality differentials as an indicator of women's subordination. Below I elaborate on this point.

Looking more closely at the data set one of the points that clearly emerges is the falling proportion of infant and child deaths with the age of the mother – the proportion falls from nearly 22 per cent for the 55–59 age group to 3.9 per cent for women aged 15–34 years. While the reasons for this trend are complex, we can at least speculate that some of the reduction in mortality reflects an improvement in infant and child survivorship **over time**, which has also been noted for the country as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Given the significant investments that have been made by the public sector in the provision of primary health care, electricity, safe drinking water and basic education, such trends are to be expected.

More controversially though, the data indicate a gradual convergence of male and female life chances **over time** so that the infant and child mortality rates for mothers in the youngest age group (15–34 years) are in fact masculine (m/f ratio of 1.08). Although we need to be cautious in interpreting these rates – given the small number of cases on which they are based – it is not

<sup>6</sup> There is a vast literature on this subject; some of it has been summarised in Harriss (1987).

<sup>7</sup> That sex bias does not always work in a consistent manner is shown by a study of eye disease where 'health care' caused iatrogenic loss of vision amongst male infants since they were more exposed than female infants to harmful therapy such as steroid eye cream (Cohen, cited in Harriss 1987). Similarly, gender bias in food intake does not always translate into female disadvantage as far as anthropometric and mortality outcomes are concerned because females need absolutely less of most nutrients than do males (Harriss 1990).

<sup>8</sup> In the Punjab study girls born to mothers who already had one or more surviving daughters experienced 53 per cent higher chance of mortality than the average rate which is recorded for their male and female siblings.

<sup>9</sup> It would be interesting to see whether this point still holds in the context of the dramatic reductions in fertility rates that have been documented since the late 1980s (government sources claim that there has been a 50 per cent reduction in the population growth rate – from 3.9 per cent down to nearly 2 per cent).

<sup>10</sup> The major problem in interpreting these rates stems from the difficulty of differentiating between 'historical time' and 'personal time'. In other words, some of the reduction in mortality could reflect an improvement in infant and child survivorship over time (as we assume). But a woman's life cycle position, quite independently of 'historical' factors, is also likely to affect the welfare of her children. Unfortunately our data set does not allow us to differentiate between these two factors.

unreasonable to assume that a convergence (or even reversal) of male and female mortality rates for infants and children may be happening under conditions of general mortality decline. If this is indeed the case, over the next decade or so the phenomenon of excess female mortality during infancy and childhood may be disappearing from the Iranian life tables due to the general improvements in infant and child survivorship. It is quite likely that the discriminatory forces (such as differential health care) which led to excess female mortality in the past are still in place, but because of the general improvements in the nutrition and health status of infants and children they no longer translate into mortality differentials. In other words, if we assume that excess female mortality was due to discriminatory behaviour, it would not necessarily follow that the disappearance of the excess has been due to a modification of that behaviour; it might have been mainly a function of the mortality decline itself. But it is worth bearing in mind that the convergence of male and female life chances during infancy and early childhood is not an inevitable (or automatic) outcome of mortality decline.

Looking at the broader picture, it becomes clear that although over time, with mortality decline, the female disadvantage in life expectation is likely to disappear, sex differences in early age mortality have tended to persist in some regions more than others. Punjab is a particularly instructive case since it shows that a pronounced sex differential in early age mortality can remain even in an economic environment conducive to improved survivorship. Improvements in living standards and health care in the Ludhiana District (Punjab), for example, have led to significant rises in early age survivorship and overall life expectancy; the infant mortality rate fell from 129 per 1,000 live births to 66 per 1,000 between 1972 and 1984. Yet the sex differentials in infant and child mortality appear to be fairly resilient to change (Das Gupta 1987). Similar findings have been reported in a number of other village-level studies from North India (e.g. Kynch 1994 cited in Jackson 1996).

What, if anything, can we conclude from the Iranian scenario? While it would be reasonable to interpret the observed sex bias in early age mortality as an outcome of the anti-female ideologies expressed in health care practices, it is unlikely for

the apparent convergence of male and female early age mortality to be due to a modification of the discriminatory norms and behaviour. In fact as the following section will show, over time gender divisions and hierarchies have become even more accentuated in the Rafsanjan district, and women have become more of an economic 'liability' (Miller 1981). It may then very well be that discriminatory ideologies and practices no longer translate into mortality outcomes. The fact that gender bias may no longer be reflected in mortality data also points to other aspects of gender discrimination that are not so easy to capture through quantitative indicators of poverty. It is to these issues that we now turn.

#### 4 Why Vulnerability (Rather than Poverty or Exclusion)?

Vulnerability, as the literature suggests, is not the same as poverty. Those who are vulnerable in any society are exposed to particular risks, shocks and stress, but they are not necessarily poor (Chambers 1989). Vulnerability is often contrasted with security and linked with net assets – 'a wide range of tangible and intangible stores of value or claims to assistance which can be mobilised in a crisis' (Swift 1989: 11). The inclusion of **intangible** assets, which should include kinship-based entitlements or claims, goes a long way in making definitions of vulnerability more sensitive to the particular circumstances that women find themselves in (even though in Swift's own formulation there is no mention of claims on **other household members**). As Kabeer (1989) points out, these intrahousehold kinship-based entitlements are particularly significant for women's well-being and security in contexts where they are classified as dependent minors within marriage. However, as we will see below, even where marriage offers a considerable degree of security and well-being, it does not seem to stop women from striving to make their independent entitlements – entitlements that are not mediated through marriage, such as direct sale of labour power or ownership of assets – more secure.

One of the recurring concerns that emerged in conversations with women from different social classes in Rafsanjan was that of 'security' – the fear of 'being abandoned' by their husbands, or of 'being left to starve on the streets'. Curiously though, the institution of marriage seemed to be quite stable:

there were only two cases of divorce (where men had walked away from marriage) in the two villages. In many ways the amelioration of poverty at the household level has meant that men, who are the ones who control the new sources of income, are in a better position to meet their basic normative obligations towards women (feeding the family), and are thus less likely to 'walk off'. However, despite the statistical insignificance of complete male abdication of responsibility, and the predominance of cultural representations of marriage as a 'God-ordained and harmonious institution wherein the husband is the breadwinner', women continue to strategise for 'security' outside marriage. This concern for security seems to reflect an acute awareness of the bleak prospects that they face in case of a breakdown in marriage given their deteriorating and tenuous 'independent entitlements'. As we will see below, the forces that have created opulence in this region, have also served to make women more dependent within marriage, and thus more vulnerable.

Women, like men, are also exposed to risks that are generated from relying on the market, especially for the sale of their labour power. However, the way in which men and women experience these market-generated risks are qualitatively different. As Kabeer points out in the context of Bangladesh, even when women have such independent entitlements 'they may prefer to exercise them in ways that do not disrupt kinship-based entitlements, their primary source of survival and security' (1989: 9). As we will see below, both women's entry into the wage labour market and their access to land in Rafsanjan are very much shaped by their willingness to preserve these kinship-based entitlements. Moreover, even within the market the issue of gender discrimination is not confined to the quantitative differential between male and female wages (even when 'pure' wage discrimination exists and is captured). The different 'exchange rates' that male and female labour obtain on the market constitute an important component of gender differentials in poverty, as well as being an excellent indicator of the social embeddedness of markets (markets as 'bearers of gender'). But equally important are the qualitative terms on which female and male labour get contracted. These differences in labour relations amount to different structures of vulnerability for men and women within the labour market.

Finally, since vulnerability points to specific areas of risk it does not preclude the possibility that those who are threatened by certain conditions may also be able to count upon strengths and advantages in other areas in order to avoid harm. It thus leads to less fatalistic analysis than reliance upon concepts like poverty and exclusion which are descriptions of end states in which people have lost out (Hewitt de Alcantara 1996). In Rafsanjan, for example, we find that through a number of 'feminine' investment strategies women seek to strengthen their independent entitlements: holding on to their wages and investing them in assets that are relatively resilient to male predation – gold, for example, that can be hidden away, and housing improvements which men cannot appropriate for themselves. An understanding of vulnerability that draws attention to instances of purposive action (or agency) is particularly useful when we look at the situation of women in the so-called 'patriarchal belt', given the overwhelming tendency to see these women as helpless and subordinated victims.

## 5 From Sharecroppers to Landed Labourers

One of the most spectacular developments of the past two decades in the Rafsanjan basin has been the gradual erosion of large-scale landlordism and the emergence of a more mixed rural economy that includes both extensive plantation-type operations using wage labour as well as smallholdings. The change has been facilitated through both state policy (1962 Land Reform Programme 1979 'revolutionary pumps') and local-level initiatives by the landless sharecroppers – including encroachment on common property lands. By the late 1980s when the field research was carried out more than 70 per cent of the households in the two villages owned some land and irrigation water. As might be expected, it is predominantly men who own these titles. The bulk of the male household heads are in fact landed wage labourers in a highly segmented labour market where the attached labourers occupy the apex, and the casual labourers the lower rungs. Thus in most cases the livelihood strategies of Rafsanjani households include both own-account farming of cash crops as well as sale of labour power. Only a small minority of households can be truly classified as 'middle peasants' who own relatively sizeable pistachio plots and do not hire out any labour (male or female).

It is widely recognised that the rural poor tend to rely more heavily than the rich on common property resources for meeting their basic needs. As might be expected, the rummage for land and water and the encroachment of private pistachio gardens onto common property lands in Rafsanjan has had some adverse implications in class terms – the poorer households, for example, now have to rely on the market for their fuel requirements and for some important food items. While this may mean a reduction in the amount of time women spend on household reproduction (e.g. procuring firewood), at the same time, it has undermined their independent pastoral activities which relied heavily on the village common lands for grazing. With their pastoral activities (processing a variety of dairy products) women provided an important component of the household's diet; they were also able to sell, or exchange, some of the products they processed on the market. Today only a small minority of village women engage in pastoral activities, and they tend to come from the more affluent households which have access to the capital needed for purchasing animal feed and other inputs. Moreover, the fact that animal feed now has to be purchased from merchants, rather than procured (through grazing or cutting of weeds), has led to greater male involvement in what was a predominantly female sphere.

At the same time, the fact that pistachio monoculture has replaced a more diverse agricultural economy which included both food and cash crops (wheat, barley, cotton, pistachio), combined with the rising levels of household income as a result of changes in land ownership and in labour relations, have served to narrow down women's labour participation. Up until the early 1970s women, along with men, participated in both grain harvests as well as cotton and pistachio picking. Needless to say women's in-kind wages for harvesting wheat

and barley were a fraction of men's, as were the money wages that they received for pistachio picking. In the case of cotton, harvest workers were paid on a piece-rate basis. With the cotton that women procured during the harvest season they wove coarse cotton fabrics that were used for both household consumption and sold, or exchanged, on the market.<sup>11</sup> As is argued below (Section 6), the changes in crop portfolio and the increasing levels of household opulence have reduced women's participation in field work and their opportunities for earning an income.

More importantly, the gains from land ownership have tended to be contradictory for women. The income from pistachio is in most cases completely controlled by men; most of the women interviewed did not even know how much their husbands had earned on the sale of pistachio in the previous year. In many ways pistachio has the characteristics of what Longhurst (1988) calls a 'wicked' crop: it is a non-food crop; it takes several seasons to mature and the revenues from it are lumpy (as opposed to crops like tea), which make it easier for men to monopolise. This does not necessarily mean that some of the income does not 'trickle down' to women through male-dominated decision-making processes – in the form of more food, for example, or increased leisure time. In fact with the extra income most men are now able to meet their households' basic food requirements and women's income-earning activities have become less essential for household survival. However, the way in which the gender relations have adjusted to these changes in livelihood strategies has had some contradictory implications for women. Most crucially, the increased 'leisure time', has to be set against the loss of economic independence and autonomy and the sense of vulnerability that it has entailed – a trade-off which women are only too aware of.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The disappearance of these cottage industries throughout most of Iran has to be explained in terms of the government's cheap import policies in the post-1960s oil boom.

<sup>12</sup> In response to direct questions about how they assess the changes in their working lives over time women express satisfaction about not having to perform fieldwork any more. This is not surprising. For a start, women's responses have to be seen in their historical context: the nature of the work they did was very arduous; moreover, it was performed within a social

setting where as wives/daughters/sisters of sharecroppers in a 'feudal' system they occupied very unfavourable positions, being at the 'beck and call' of the landlord and open to all sorts of abuse. However, in conversations about other issues it becomes clear that women are very concerned about the loss of economic independence. In other words, it would be very easy on the basis of a quick questionnaire for the observer to conclude that women are satisfied with the changes in their economic status. However, from comprehensive conversations and a more contextual approach it becomes clear that women's assessments of the situation are more nuanced.



## 6 Women's Control of their Own Labour Power: Translating Labour into Wages

The rights that men and women have to their own labour and to the labour of each other tend to be unequal, especially where the norms of female propriety are more strictly enforced. Poverty very often undermines the norms of seclusion and wifely dependence, which tend to constrain women's ability to dispose of their own labour power, while opulence upholds them. This can be seen in both historical and cross-class comparisons. Today working in the village orchards during the harvest season is seen as a sign of destitution – only a small group of older widows can afford to violate the norms of propriety and seclusion set by the more affluent classes. But many female respondents can recall working in the grain-rich regions in the vicinity during several harvest seasons (wheat, cotton, pistachio) each year as recently as in the 1970s. This redefinition of gendered space has meant that the labour market has become even more segmented than it was in the past, pushing the bulk of the female work force into post-harvest processing, which is carried out indoors and is confined to a couple of months a year. Even in this case some of the younger married women find that their access to the labour market is blocked by their husbands who claim that working in the processing centres can have an adverse impact on the health of their children (who are taken along with their mothers). While most women express satisfaction about not having to do arduous work 'under the sun', a number of women were clearly concerned about their limited employment options. Some of the younger unmarried women from the casual labouring households defy the village norms on propriety – which they say are set by the rich and do not apply to them. They walk to the nearby villages to work in the processing operations when the processing work in their own village ends, despite the accusations of misconduct that it entails.

Within the labour market a number of factors – social norms and structural vulnerabilities – constrain women's ability to translate their labour into

wages. For a start the repetitive tasks that are allocated to women (like pistachio peeling and sorting) are the ones that get substituted by machines. This is already happening in the Rafsanjan basin, but so far the labour displacing effect of post-harvest mechanisation has been offset by the rise in pistachio production (due to expanding acreage under cultivation).<sup>13</sup> Given the lack of alternative employment opportunities for women that are equally remunerative and dignified, mechanisation has grave implications for the bulk of the village women who rely on post-harvest processing for an independent source of income.<sup>14</sup>

While it is difficult to talk about pure wage discrimination in this context, given the highly segmented nature of the labour market, some rough estimates can be given by comparing wage rates for male and female harvest workers (even though there are not that many female harvest workers). This gives an estimated 60 per cent wage differential, which seems to have been fairly constant over a number of years. Although employers tend to explain the differential in wages in terms of men's higher productivity, women workers dispute their reasoning (after all, pistachio picking requires the famous 'nimble fingers'). A more critical manifestation of discrimination though are the social norms and power relations which serve to construct female workers as different from (and inferior to) male workers within the labour market. One of the most serious disadvantages facing the female labourers is the timing of payment and the way in which their wage rates are settled. Employers do not very often announce the wages they are offering in advance. Moreover, most women are paid two to three months after the processing operations have ended. In contrast, the wages of male casual labourers are settled before they commence work and payment is prompt. The notion of women's wages as *jahiz* money – money used for making a trousseau – like that of 'pin money' or 'money for lipstick' supports the view that women's earnings from wage work are minor and that they are neither essential to her subsistence, nor to her family's maintenance. It ensures that women are constructed as less than full labourers.

<sup>13</sup> The proportion of female labour (to total labour) falls from around 38 per cent to 25 per cent and finally 16 per cent with increasing mechanisation.

<sup>14</sup> Some forms of home-based work that are available to women have very low financial returns (e.g. quilt making); domestic work which entails loss of dignity and autonomy, is one of the least desirable occupations in these villages.

Indicative of women's vulnerability within the labour market has been the way in which international pressures have worked themselves out at the local level. Over the past two years in response to protectionist threats from importing countries on grounds of health and hygiene, the Rafsanjan Pistachio Producers Cooperative (a 'private' institution with strong government links, responsible for the marketing of pistachio exports) has encouraged employers to forbid their female wage labourers from bringing their young children along to the processing centres (on the grounds that young children contaminate the pistachio). Ironically, there seems to have been much less concern about the health hazards of millions of tons of toxic pesticides that are sprayed over the basin's orchards each year. This seems to have induced a response in a number of villages, where female workers have organised 'creche' facilities on the premises. While women's response is indicative of their willingness to do something about the discriminatory forces that are working against them, it is difficult to be jubilant about the situation. Indicative of women workers' weak power base is the fact that neither the employers nor any of the relevant public authorities have made any financial contributions to these spontaneous efforts (while lavish subsidies are available on many other inputs/services).

A more forceful indication of women's agency can be found when we look at women's labour obligations within marriage. The picture emerging from smallholder agriculture is in many ways typical of 'male farming': men own most of the land, they make all the production decisions, they purchase the inputs, make the marketing decisions and control the revenues. But it is not uncommon to find wives – especially in the more affluent households where women do not work in the wage labour market – demanding a wage for processing their husbands' harvest, and fairly customary for husbands to acquiesce to this demand (where they don't, the wife very often secretly takes her share from his pistachio harvest). Women's demand for a wage effectively undermines the notion that a wife's labour obligations within marriage is part of her wifely duties.

In some situations a system of reward in kind for a wife's labour already exists and is extended to include a new crop (e.g. Guyer 1980). In Rafsanjan,

however, such a system does not appear to have existed – neither in practice nor as a cultural paradigm. Although there may have been some precedence for this claim in the Islamic notion that a wife can demand a 'wage' from her husband in return for breastfeeding, it is nevertheless critical to ask why women in this particular region are claiming a wage for their family labour obligations (since it is not a widespread practice throughout Iran) and why they are doing so now. It seems to us that women's demand for a wage is in response to their restricted access to an independent source of income (for reasons noted above) in an increasingly monetised setting, and to their inability to tap into their husbands' cash earnings. In other words, it is in response to the pressures generated through the changing socio-economic context and the changing conjugal rights and obligations that women are invoking this new claim, thereby forcing a re-negotiation of the conjugal contract.

## 7 Translating Wages into Assets

While it is not the intention of this section to directly assess whether or not women's wage employment is having an impact on power relations within the household, issues of power are nevertheless implicit when we look at ways in which women try to retain control over their wages and translate them into assets that provide a degree of security and well-being. To add some clarity to the discussion it would be useful to say a few words about the scope and the context of women's employment.

First, leaving aside for the moment the familial ideologies and social processes that intervene to differentiate men's and women's wages, any empowering affect that women's wages may have is likely to be reduced where that employment is seasonal (rather than constant throughout the year). This is likely to be the case partly because it does not provide an adequate 'fall back' position for women, and also because in monetary terms it makes a smaller contribution to household survival than would full-time work (perceived contributions), thereby weakening their claims on household resources and reducing the threat of its withdrawal. In addition, the forms of social solidarity that may emerge from working in a collective enterprise are likely to be more tenuous when the work is carried out on a seasonal or *ad hoc* basis than when it is full-time.

The fact that women workers in these villages have not so far responded to the unfair manner in which their wage rates are settled, for example, may have to be explained in these terms.

The second point worth noting is the fact that women's processing work is carried out outside the household premises and under social relationships that are not familial; this should make it easier for women to control the proceeds. In Rafsanjan women deal directly with their employers (or bailiffs and managers representing the employer) and without the mediation of their husbands/fathers. This arrangement is quite different from the situation of home-based carpet weavers of central Iran described by Afshar (1985), where village women supply practically all the labour input while their husbands make the critical production and marketing decisions and control the proceeds from the sale of carpets.<sup>15</sup>

The seasonal nature of women's work and the fact that their wages are obtained in bulk, tends to have a number of other implications as well. Even though in some households, usually the poorer casual labouring households, women spent a portion of their wage on food requirements, this was not a prevalent pattern. The general trend seems to be for men to allocate a portion of their wage to housekeeping (given its regular nature), while women earmark their wages for bulkier, non-food items. These include articles for the house (doors, glass for windows, bricks and tiles, roof repair); gold; consumer durables for their daughters' trousseau; and smaller non-food items like clothes and household durables. Under pressure from their husbands and fathers, women also reluctantly contribute to agricultural investments – purchase of land and water.

A number of factors – divisibility, ease of sale or mortgage, and maintaining value in bad times – have been identified as characteristics of tangible assets that appear important to vulnerable households (Chambers 1989). Women's investment strategies in Rafsanjan reveal a couple of additional characteristics that tangible assets need to have: the ease with which they can be concealed or hidden away ('hidden assets'), and the indivisibility of their

benefits (communal consumption); the two characteristics seem to be mutually exclusive. Gold and jewelery are the perfect female assets since in addition to the factors highlighted by Chambers (above), they are also easy to conceal. Women's investments in housing seem to conform to the second characteristic noted above: although they cannot be concealed (as in the case of gold), the benefits flowing from improved housing have to be used communally – they cannot be diverted away for individual use.

Very often when a young couple move into their new 'home' the building is still incomplete, and a significant proportion of the wife's wages tend to be spent on the needed repairs and constructions. While women's preferences for investing their wages in their homes may be interpreted as yet another manifestation of their attachment to the collective or family aspects of consumption, in this case their motives seem to be more complex. In most households, the house and the land on which it is built constitute the wife's *mehr* – the contractual wealth that will have to be transferred to her upon divorce. Although in practice these contractual obligations are very rarely upheld, women were aware of their legal rights and explained their housing investments in these terms. More important though, unlike assets such as agricultural land, the benefits from housing cannot be alienated by the more powerful members of the household for their own personal use. The land that women inherit from their fathers, for example, tends to be managed by their husbands, along with any other land that he owns; and he controls the proceeds in much the same way that he controls the income from his own land. It is not therefore surprising that married women refrain from investing their wages in land/water (they nevertheless pressurise their husbands to specify a share of his land for them in a will, given the uncertainties that surround the enforcement of legal prescriptions). The only women who worked and saved in order to buy a plot of land and a share of water were some of the village widows. Married women's preferences for investing their savings in the home can be better understood if they are seen in the context of these gender-based constraints.

<sup>15</sup> In many ways (gender division of labour, marriage patterns) the region where Afshar did her research was

similar to Rafsanjan – both fall within the central Iranian plateau.

Somewhat similar motivations underpin women's preferences for investing their wages in the trousseau. For a start it has to be noted that unlike the Hindu dowry which is a flow of gifts from the bride's family to the groom's, the Iranian *jahiz* belongs to the bride (and her household). In fact, it is very often the only share a daughter has from her parents' wealth (Afshar 1985). And yet at the same time, the transition from a semi-subsistence to a cash economy combined with the increasing opulence of the village elite is increasing the financial burden of the trousseau, which now includes a variety of bulky consumer durables like television sets and refrigerators. Women from the less affluent households are thus under increasing pressure to ensure a minimum respectability for themselves and their daughters by procuring a 'descent' trousseau – a burden to which men refuse to contribute.

It is quite common to find men complaining about their wife's reluctance to contribute to their agricultural investments, while they 'waste' large sums of money on the trousseau. This does not, however, mean that women exercise complete control over their wages. In nearly all casual labouring households when land and water was being purchased, women's wages constituted a significant proportion of the funds with which their fathers and husbands purchased land (and thereby became landed for the first time, or increased their holdings). In this case though, women relinquish their wages under pressure – both subtle and direct – from their husbands. The following two illustrations are taken from two case studies where there had been open conflicts between husband and wife on this issue.

Mehdi is a casual labourer in his early 30s. In 1987 he purchased 100 *ghassab* of land with his savings from his wages, his wife's wages from pistachio processing and the sale of her gold ring and bracelets (which she had purchased with her wages prior to her marriage). Roughly one-third of the money was hers. As she explained:

I told him 'since I am also paying for the land, then at least register some of it in my name' ... he said we don't have any *joda-savayi* (Fati)

The expression *joda-savayi* translated literally means 'separate-otherness'. To be individuated,

autonomous, and covetous of one's own sphere is a culturally negative concept. Here Mehdi was implying that they constitute a single unit, thereby disapproving of her selfish demand.

Asghar, another casual labourer and his wife, Maryam, both in their early 30s, purchased their first plot of land (50 *ghassab*) in 1985. In this case Maryam provided half the funds by selling her gold (which she had purchased in previous years), while Asghar paid for the rest with his savings from wage labouring. Maryam, however, insisted that 25 *ghassab* of the land should be registered in her name and he agreed. As she put it:

I told him that I would sell my gold only if what I paid for was made in my own name because ... what if he leaves me and enjoys the land with another woman? (Maryam)

While the consumerism and class differentiation which are the direct outcomes of Rafsanjan's growth trajectory seem to underpin the inflation of the trousseau, it is a mistake to see the conflict between husband and wife over the trousseau as a conflict between 'essential' and 'non-essential' categories of expenditure (as the village men seem to do). After all, the expenses for wedding festivities to which men contribute substantial sums of money are even more superfluous (and even more so is their expenditure on narcotics – opium). More importantly, women's preferences for investing in the house and in household durables has to be seen in the context of male control over productive assets like land and dairy animals. In a neighbouring region (Bardsir) where the rural economy has remained semi-subsistence and where women continue to play a dominant role in the pastoral economy, not only does the trousseau include dairy animals (rather than bulky consumer durables), but women are also active pastoral entrepreneurs in their own right, reinvesting their savings from the sale of milk and wool in dairy animals (Razavi 1992).

## 8 Conclusion

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this account. First, while female disadvantage in early age mortality is indicative of discriminatory forces operating against female infants and children, the convergence of male and female life chances does

not necessarily mean that those discriminatory norms and behaviour have been modified. The disappearance of excess female mortality may just be an outcome of the mortality decline itself. In the case study reviewed in this paper we have found that the overall improvements in infant and child survival, due in large part to public sector investments in sanitation and health care, have also led to the disappearance of excess female mortality (but it is important to emphasise that this is not an inevitable or irreversible outcome). Ironically, the disappearance of excess female mortality has happened at the same time that gender hierarchies have become more accentuated and women have become more of an economic 'liability' in this region. It thus seems to us that well-being indicators, such as mortality, may be too blunt; they cannot capture some of the qualitative changes in gender relations that have left women 'worse off'.

These qualitative issues were discussed under the rubric of vulnerability – the bundles of risk stemming from the deterioration in women's independent entitlements and from the changes in conjugal relations, which are hemming women in and making them more dependent on male incomes. On the one hand, the rising levels of household income appear to have strengthened the norms of propriety which tend to constrain women's ability to dispose of their own labour power. This can be seen in the withdrawal of female labour from farm work and its limitation to operations that are spatially (indoor and village-based) and temporally (seasonal) confined. On the other hand, the weakening of women's own-account economic activities and the rising levels of cash income that are directed into men's hands have made women more dependent on male incomes. It was nevertheless argued that even where marriage offers some degree of security and well-being to women – because men control the main sources of income and are able to meet their

basic normative obligations towards women – it does not seem to stop women from striving to make their independent entitlements more secure. Women's strategies include: engaging in wage labour (albeit within a segmented labour market) and retaining control over their earnings; demanding a wage for their family labour obligations; demanding a share of the family legacy; and converting their wages into assets that are less vulnerable to male predation.

In making sense of these qualitative changes we found the notion of 'vulnerability' to be quite useful because it highlighted issues of risk and security which seem to be central to the narrative. At the same time it also drew attention to women's strategies for avoiding harm – issues of agency. The latter are sometimes absent from analyses that rely upon concepts like poverty and exclusion which are descriptions of end states in which people have lost out.

Finally, as far as policy is concerned, increasing levels of household opulence seem to have had contradictory implications for women in this particular region – improving their survival chances, reducing their work burden, but also making them more dependent on male incomes and thus more insecure within marriage. The obvious lesson seems to be that the amelioration of poverty at the household level does not necessarily leave the female members 'better off'. As was noted at the beginning of this paper, the specific ways in which macro-policies affect women depend on a variety of mediating factors, amongst them the growth trajectory, the various institutions that mediate the benefits of growth and the pre-existing gender relations. If poverty reduction is to be combined with gender equity, then alternative ways will have to be found – through changes in some or all of these institutions – in making 'development' truly gender-equitable.

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Beyond the Rhetoric of Choice: Promoting Women's Economic Empowerment in Developed Countries

Claartje J. Vinkenburg

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**Abstract** In preparing for the 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action on women's economic empowerment, both formal policy documents and media coverage in developed countries such as the Netherlands resonate with the rhetoric of choice between work and care. In this article, my central argument is that framing the combination of work and care as a matter of personal choice stands in the way of economically empowering women. To promote sustainability in combining career and care, we need to expose, challenge and bend underlying norms about gender roles. For policymakers to take responsibility in the economic empowerment of women, both policy documents and media coverage should promote win-win instead of zero sum solutions in combining work and care, for both men and women.

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## 1 Introduction

In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), the resolution adopted by the UN at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, 'women and the economy' was identified as one of 12 critical areas. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN Women, founded in 2010, has adopted women's economic empowerment as one of its four priority areas. UN Women recently helped establish the Knowledge Gateway for Women's Economic Empowerment (EmpowerWomen.org), which is an open global platform that promotes collaboration, learning and innovation to advance women's economic empowerment. In the BPfA, various strategic objectives were formulated to promote women's economic empowerment through equal rights, opportunities, and access to economic resources. One of these objectives refers to the harmonisation of work and care responsibilities for women and men. This strategic objective is tied to the (implicit) assumption that women's economic empowerment is typically hindered by their larger share in care responsibilities for dependent children and extended family members compared to men.

As is evident from various policy documents, economic independence has been as a central

element of policies towards gender equality and the empowerment of women in many developed countries, including the Netherlands. However, the dominant and normative rhetoric of choice between work and care in the public debate in such countries stands in the way of women's economic empowerment. In this article, I draw on documentation from the Netherlands' preparation for the 20-year review of the BPfA to posit that in framing the combination of work and care as a matter of personal choice, and by effectively leaving such issues to the private sphere, policymakers wash their hands of their responsibility of setting and meeting goals for women's economic empowerment.

In the Netherlands, government policymakers appear to have become complacent when it comes to the economic empowerment of women. This may be because of relative wealth, because women's care responsibilities are viewed as largely incompatible with full economic participation, and because previous initiatives to promote women's labour participation and economic independence failed to achieve the predefined goals. The same holds for many other developed countries, even if circumstances differ (see Barns and Preston (2002) for Australia, Ellingsæter (2009) for the Nordic

states, and Lewis *et al.* (2008) for a comparative study across Europe). For progress in women's economic empowerment in such settings, of which the Netherlands is the example given here, a host of different actions has been suggested, implemented and – often – discarded as ineffective. A recalibration of the way government policymakers communicate about women, men, and their roles in society is needed in order to promote a cross-fertilisation between women's economic empowerment and sustainably combining work and care. Some have argued that we need to look at the social dimensions of constraint, as well as the cultural limits of 'choice', in exploring pathways to women's economic empowerment (Cornwall and Edwards 2010).

In this article I am not arguing for or against philosophical positions on free will and determinism. I am not trying to downplay the importance of the freedom of choice, and I do not intend to prescribe how women and men should make decisions in combining work and care. I am building on work on choice, norms and change to entice those who prepare policy documents and media representations on women's economic empowerment to move beyond the rhetoric of choice (van Engen, Vinkenburg and Dijkers 2012; Vinkenburg *et al.* 2012; Vinkenburg, van Engen and Peters 2015). Not only should we move beyond the rhetoric of choice, we should also change from talking about choosing between ('either or') to combining both ('and and') work and care.

## **2 The choice rhetoric in preparations for Beijing**

The Netherlands' review of the implementation of the BPfA (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2014), states that:

The one-and-a-half income household model has replaced the breadwinner's model as the standard situation for a two-parent family. This usually manifests itself in a situation in which the man is the 'main breadwinner' and the woman 'earns a bit on the side'. [...] This situation is seen as a problem, among other reasons, due to the fact that one in three marriages fail and the financially dependent partner often is then forced to apply for social benefits. Studies and experience have shown that women tend to refrain from explicitly factoring in such a worst case scenario and therefore invest little in their future once they start to work part-time. A temporary choice to work fewer hours often turns out to have permanent consequences. Women start to work fewer hours when children arrive on the scene. Women regaining their economic

independence once the children grow up happens much less often in the Netherlands than in other countries (2014: 54).

At the same time, the Netherlands' sixth periodic report to the UN Commission on the Status of Women, states that:

Emancipation is a process that cannot be forced on individuals. Freedom of choice is an important principle underpinning policy. The government prefers to use persuasion, by pointing to the possible consequences if women make choices that do not contribute to their own empowerment... Women who then opt for greater independence by, for example, working longer hours, can count on the government's support (Netherlands Government 2014: 14).

According to the BPfA review (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2014), while goals for women's economic independence were first formulated in 1995, 'participation in the job market among women rose rapidly, but many women chose to work part-time in order to be able to combine care duties and work better. So labour participation did not always lead to economic independence' (2014: 12). Therefore, the 'current government cabinet has abandoned the quantitative objective for the economic self-reliance of women' (2014: 13). 'The task of ensuring the ease of combining work and family care is not solely the responsibility of government, but also (and particularly) the responsibility of employers and employees sitting around the negotiating table' (2014: 55). In failing to achieve its BPfA goals for the economic self-reliance of women, the Netherlands government, in true liberal rather than social-democratic tradition, shifts the responsibility for this failure away from the state to the individual and her negotiating skills.

## **3 Freedom of choice?**

Freedom of choice is one of the pillars of the Netherlands government's gender equality policy. Lewis *et al.* (2008) states that the rhetoric of choice has become an important means for the state to negotiate societal tensions inherent to the reconciliation of work and care. States operate as choice-promoting institutions (Olson 2002), supporting certain choices over others. However, according to Olson:

Choice has been used to draw an ideological line between public and private life that is highly problematic for women... Private life,

in this construction, is a protected realm of unencumbered choice that contrasts with the compromises inherent in public, political life. In such a scheme, arrangements about the distribution of domestic labor and resources are 'private' and cannot be second-guessed by others (2002: 388).

Ellingsæter (2009) explains how changing employment patterns among women reflect changes in the societal context of people's choices. Political, economic and cultural opportunities and constraints shape aspirations and expectations. In a critical reflection on preference theory (see Hakim 2003), McRae (2003) argues that in Hakim's work the impact of situational and structural constraints on women's choices is insufficiently taken into account. Women do not have unfettered choices about how they wish to live because there are major constraints limiting or forcing their choices. 'At best, women's employment behaviour is a reflection of their historically available opportunities and constraints' (McDonald, Bradley and Guthrie 2006: 472). True freedom of choice is thus an illusion.

The choice rhetoric is not only dominant in policy papers, but also in media representations of how women and men combine work and care (Stephens and Levine 2011). Williams and Bornstein (2007) give an overview of the choice rhetoric in the popular press in the USA. Most recently, the Netherlands' media coverage of the 2015 monitoring report on women in executive positions resonates with choice for part-time work as the main cause of limited progress (Financieel Dagblad 2015). Also women themselves when asked to explain their situation commonly fall back on the rhetoric of choice, which reflects 'the culturally pervasive discourse of mothers', not fathers', ability to choose whether to participate in paid work at all' (Webber and Williams 2008: 755). According to Stone (2013), a focus on individual women and their 'choices' and preferences obscures institutional limits and barriers, as well as costs borne by women who 'opt out' or 'opt in-between' (Grant-Vallone and Ensher 2011).

Gender roles are increasingly viewed as an important factor in work-family decision-making (Andringa, Nieuwenhuis and van Gerven 2015). Injunctive and gendered norms about breadwinners and caregivers bind our choices. While often implicit, they are confirmed by the structural design of our society, and continuously reproduced by the media. To complicate matters further, almost every public debate and personal conversation about

combining work and care is infused by pervasive norms about the social roles of men and women. Norms thus effectively serve as a straitjacket that force men and women into certain behaviours, and limit their freedom of choice. Those who step outside the norm can expect questions, raised eyebrows, and perhaps even discrimination. The impact of societal norms on decision-making and behaviour through processes of socialisation, internalisation and normalisation is well described (Evans and Diekmann 2009). Paradoxically, the normative nature of norms is rarely recognised: 'Gender norms function as an unseen, unthematized background for people's choices' (Olson 2002: 395). Not only are these norms dominant in determining both our decisions and their short and long-term consequences, but the impact of these norms is exacerbated by the rhetoric of personal choice. If every decision in combining work and care is framed as something that is up to the individual, it becomes increasingly difficult to forge systemic change.

#### **4 Bending norms**

As norms based on gender roles underlie decision-making and behaviour in combining work and care, women's economic empowerment can only be achieved by critically re-examining such norms and their impact. The question, in looking beyond the rhetoric of choice, is how gendered norms and matching structural factors that play a determinative role in shaping decision-making can be uncovered, exposed, and changed. Olson (2002), in a critical analysis of policy changes in Sweden, develops six ways of using cultural agency to renegotiate gender norms. I propose that instead of framing decisions surrounding work and care as choice, we should focus on the critical conditions needed for effectively combining work and care. One of these conditions will undoubtedly pertain to high-quality low-cost care for those who need it as a basic provision. Another crucial condition is true flexibility in place and time of work, without negative sanctions. But most importantly, policymakers and media representatives should start talking and writing differently about combining work and care, and thus challenge and bend norms. The combination of work and care should be framed as 'and and' rather than 'either or'. Work *and* care instead of work *or* care. In doing so, women can be economically empowered, while simultaneously improving opportunities for giving and receiving care.

Policy changes affect decision-making, and may ultimately lead to changes in norms and gender roles (Sjöberg 2004). This implies that norms are

not set in stone, and that policy changes can result in sustainable societal outcomes such as women's economic empowerment, more wealth, higher fertility, and improved wellbeing of all who work and all who need care.

In conclusion, both policy documents and media coverage in developed countries in discussions on

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- efforts to empower women economically should refrain from the rhetoric of choice, and should promote win-win instead of zero sum solutions in combining work and care. By doing so, the Netherlands' government, especially, can show its willingness and ability to take responsibility in meeting the strategic objectives of the BPfA in terms of women's economic empowerment.
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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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## 1 Introduction

Poverty has not always been analysed from a gender perspective. Prior to the feminist contributions to poverty analysis, the poor were either seen as composed entirely of men or else women's needs and interests were assumed to be identical to, and hence subsumable under, those of male household heads. Gender research and advocacy has challenged the gender-blindness of conventional poverty measurement, analysis and policy in a number of different ways. Early research singled out the female-headed households as a disproportionately represented category in the ranks of the poor (Buvinic and Youssef 1978; Kossoudji and Mueller 1983; Merrick and Schmink 1983). This particular link between gender and poverty was a relatively visible one in conventional poverty line measurement, since disaggregation by gender of head of household could easily be accommodated. Female heads of households as 'the poorest of the poor' consequently became – and have remained – a primary variable in the equation between gender and poverty.

Subsequent research directly challenged the ability of the poverty line approach to capture the gender dimensions of poverty. Evidence of systematic gender inequalities – amongst adults as well as children – in basic well-being outcomes within the household suggested that household-based measures of income/expenditure missed out on the unequal distribution of deprivation among household members, and hence the actual incidence of poverty within a population (Agarwal 1986; Kabeer 1989). And studies from a variety of different contexts have shown that women were more likely than men to spend resources under their jurisdiction on basic household needs (Whitehead 1981; see also contributions in Bruce and Dwyer 1988), a finding which was also given quantitative confirmation (see references in Alderman *et al.* 1995). Thus, on grounds of welfare, basic needs as well as intra-household equity, there were powerful arguments for investing in women.

In addition, some feminist scholars have argued compellingly that any concern with social justice must start with the concerns of poor Third World women. Particularly in contexts where race, class and/or caste introduced extreme forms of stratification, a strategy for social justice which started from

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**Naila Kabeer**

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some notion of women's shared interests across these divides was a difficult one to sustain. Instead, the vantage point of the most oppressed appeared to offer a more strategic entry point for grasping – and tackling – the complexities of subordination in the interests of a more just development. As Peggy Antrobus put it, 'the strongest case for the focus on the poor Third World woman is that in her we find the conjuncture of race, class, gender and nationality which symbolises underdevelopment' (1989, p. 202; see also Sen and Grown 1985; Kabeer 1994).

This persuasive body of evidence attesting to the gendered nature of poverty has had ramifications in the policy arena. In methodological terms, it highlighted the weakness of conventional household income-/expenditure-based measurements of poverty in capturing its gender dimension and suggested alternative indicators, such as female headship (as in the IFAD study on world poverty) as well as indicators of individual well-being and entitlement (such as the UNDP's gender-disaggregated Human Development Index). Concern with women as 'the poorest of the poor' is now routinely referred to in official policy discourse and the theme of 'women in poverty' occupied an important place in the Beijing Platform for Action. Policy makers have begun to target women specifically in their antipoverty efforts, often through the formation of separate women's groups, in a range of poverty-related efforts: microcredit, food-for-work, vulnerable feeding programmes, training and extension services. Channelling resources through women in poverty-alleviation programmes appeared to serve a range of policy goals: basic needs, welfare, equity and even women's empowerment.

However, alongside advocacy efforts to highlight the gender dimensions of poverty, unease has also been expressed at the selective terms on which gender has been assimilated into the poverty discourse. An early expression of this unease is found in Buvinic (1983) who suggested that the enthusiasm demonstrated within development agencies in the 1970s for a focus on 'women in poverty' reflected two inter-related considerations. Firstly, such a focus readily accommodated the pre-existing welfare-orientation of most programmes for women which were designed to address the needs of poor women exclusively in terms of their roles as mothers and

wives. Secondly, it allowed official development agencies to sidestep the alternative of an antipoverty strategy which would have justified assistance to poor women in terms of productivity rather than welfare. The redistributive connotations of such an approach were believed to have the potential for causing conflict – between women and men and between different classes of women.

More recent approaches to poverty, such as micro-credit programmes for women as well as the World Bank's two-pronged strategy for poverty reduction, appear to unify welfare and productivity considerations. But unease with the encapsulation of gender concerns within the poverty agenda continues (Jackson 1996). Analysis appears to have been replaced in policy circles by simple and sweeping generalisations. The automatic inclusion of women in the category of 'vulnerable group', the equation of female headship with poverty and tenuously substantiated claims about the global feminisation of poverty. This has been accompanied by the increasing 'instrumentalisation' of women by major agencies, such as the World Bank. As Jackson puts it, 'Gender issues have been taken on board insofar as they are consistent with other development concerns (including poverty) and insofar as women are seen to offer a means to these, other, ends' (1996 p. 490). The conflation of gender concerns with poverty matters allows issues of gender discrimination and injustice which affect the well-being of women *qua* women to disappear from the agenda (Kabeer 1996). Simultaneously, of course, the poverty of men becomes increasingly sidelined, and the costs of masculinity, whether borne by men themselves or passed onto other family members, is erased from view.

The resort to instrumentalist arguments for channelling resources to women is often symptomatic of the institutional weakness of gender advocates, particularly those working within major development bureaucracies, *vis-à-vis* both policymakers as well as other claimants on policy resources. As Razavi points out 'Internal policy advocacy has to demonstrate positive spinoffs in order to win allies and to press its claims successfully against rival claimants' (Razavi, forthcoming, 1997). Gender advocacy, like any other form of advocacy, needs simple but eloquent generalisations, formulated in appropriate language if it is to get the attention of those

responsible for key decision-making<sup>1</sup>. However, to sustain that attention and, more importantly, to ensure that it is translated into effective and enabling action, we also need a constant process of iteration between the general and the particular, and their practical implications for the interlinkages between gender, poverty and inequality. Both instrumentalism and generalisation need to be backed up by ongoing empirical analysis and the development of sound analytical frameworks.

This Bulletin is intended as a contribution to the task by moving beyond the existing generalisations about gender and poverty to reconsider their empirical and analytical interlinkages in a range of different contexts. Some of the contributions use empirical case studies to theorise context-specific versions of these linkages. Others take empirical findings as a starting point for a more general analysis. The empirical material covers urban as well as rural, national as well as cross-cultural contexts: Iran (Shahra Razavi), West Bengal (Ben Rogaly), Karnataka (Ramya Subrahmanian), Malaysia (Gillian Hart), Karnataka and Pakistan (Jo Beall), Costa Rica, the Philippines and Mexico (Sylvia Chant), Ghana (Rachel Yates), Zambia (Elizabeth Harrison), West Africa (Mathew Lockwood) and South Africa (Shamim Meer). In addition, Cecile Jackson attempts to link the specificities of locale within a broader framework of human rights deriving from commonalities across locales.

A workshop was held in March, 1997 to discuss the contributions and to pull out some of their common themes. These are discussed in this Editorial. As Ann Whitehead pointed out at the workshop, attempts to make direct links between gender and structural adjustment policies have conventionally generated a 'variables-based' approach. A very

different approach is evident in the contributions here. While changing macroeconomic environments are clearly the backdrop against which many of the case studies are located, the focus of the analysis is on how such change was experienced at the local level and what this tells us about the link between gender, poverty and inequality. An important analytical point reiterated in these contributions is that gender relations are not confined to the domestic arena – although households constitute an important institutional site on which gender relations are played out – but are made, remade and contested in a range of institutional arenas. What occurs in the broader economy and through state action is mediated through these meso-level institutions, and their impact on the lives of women and men from different social groups will be shaped by how they are positioned in relation to these institutions.

## **2 Gender, Poverty and Inequality: Unpacking the Relationship**

A conceptual unpacking of the concept of poverty is a useful starting point for discussing the main themes of this Bulletin because it can help to demonstrate both how gender 'fits' into poverty analysis and why it is not reducible to it. Poverty can be seen as a dually constituted form of deprivation: deprivation in the sense of basic 'ends' or needs and deprivation in the means for satisfying these needs. Basic needs deprivation was conventionally associated with some of the more visible and familiar consequences of shortfalls in household purchasing power e.g. inadequate shelter, food, clothing, education and health. But it is increasingly extended to more intangible forms of deprivation: social isolation, vulnerability in times of crisis and dependency relationships (Chambers

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<sup>1</sup> The pressures on internal advocates to make their case in the language of numbers was compellingly illustrated for me at a meeting at the Feminist Economics Conference at Tours, 1995, when I asked representatives of the UNDP's Human Development Report about the methodology used to arrive at one of the most widely cited of these generalisations which came out in a UN publication for the mid-decade conference in Copenhagen, 1980, viz, that women account for two-thirds of the world's working hours, receive a tenth of the world's income and own less than one per cent of the world's property. It was revealed by a member of the audience who had known the author of the statement that it was based on 'hunch' rather than a massive

statistical exercise. This is, of course, an empirically dubious practice. At the same time, there were good reasons that the declaration gained the currency that it did: it is intuitively plausible, it fits with the findings of large numbers of smaller scale surveys, it captures the imagination, it speaks to an equity rationale and it is probably true. It is also unlikely that any agency, individually or collaboratively, was at that time willing to put resources into a more rigorous calculation of gender inequalities in hours of work, rates of return and ownership of assets. Most existing global calculations are based on incomplete data, heroic assumptions and a certain amount of hunch.

1988). Underlying these 'outcomes' is a second order and deeper level of deprivations which relate to the adequacy of means to meet these basic needs and which constitute the causal mechanisms through which poverty is reproduced (Kabeer 1994). The problem with poverty line discourse is that it privileges income as the key means and the market as the key institution for meeting basic needs.

A different approach to these issues is possible if we bear in mind that, in reality, people meet their needs through a variety of resources aside from income, and gain access to these resources through a variety of institutional relationships aside from those of the market. A reformulation of Sen's concept of entitlements (1982, 1990), which draws attention to the different basis of claims on resources which prevail in a society, has the merit of expanding the analysis of poverty from access to the market to this wider set of relationships and activities. Entitlements can be seen as generated through the rules, norms and practices which characterise different institutional arenas – market-based exchange; state provision; and the 'moral economy' of community and kinship – and which determine who gets what and on what terms.<sup>2</sup> Within such a framework, inequalities are generated as a result of inadequate resource endowments, of the unfavourable terms on which one set of resources are exchanged for another or else by 'unruly' practices<sup>3</sup> where the rules or norms of entitlement are ignored, subverted, overridden or simply changed. Equally, of course, resistance to inequalities – and to the deprivations and dependencies it creates – occurs through struggles over the definition and interpretations of rules and norms and a variety of other practices through which people seek to protect, enhance or realise the value of their entitlements.

By encompassing both the outcomes of deprivation as well as their underlying causes, such an approach

draws attention to issues of equity and justice as well as to basic needs and welfare. It takes us beyond an economic focus on ownership and exchange to socially constructed definitions of who is entitled to what and on what basis: in other words, to questions of identities and interests as well as to divisions of labour, power and resources. It also shifts attention away from a static view of poverty – poverty as end-state – to a more dynamic concern with the processes of exclusion, inclusion and marginalisation which are set in motion by shifts in the configuration of entitlement relationships within which people define goals and devise strategies and which place some groups of people at an entitlement disadvantage in relation to others.

And most importantly, for the purposes of this Bulletin, inasmuch as the inequalities encoded in the rules and practices of different institutional arenas 'entitle' women and men differently and unequally within different social groups, an institutional approach draws attention to the likelihood that inequality, deprivation and insecurity will be diversely constituted across a population along axes of gender, caste and other forms of social inequality. Since the focus is on 'functioning' outcomes as defined by survival, security and some notion of self-determination as the object of the analysis, rather than on household income/consumption *per se*, the poor/non-poor distinction is no longer tenable. Poverty as a result of entitlement failure or shortfall curtails choices and agency and imposes painful 'trade-offs between different forms of privations' (Chant, this volume). Equally, however, gender<sup>4</sup> differentiates the experience of poverty – and wealth – in terms of the kinds of claims and entitlements which women and men mobilise, the goals they prioritise and the forms of agency they can exercise in negotiating meanings and challenging distributions. Gender justice becomes an integral component of social justice.

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<sup>2</sup> Thus within labour and commodity markets, people can exchange what they own or control for a different bundle of resources through selling their labour power in the production of goods and services for a wage in cash or kind; they can exchange the commodities they have produced. Within financial markets, people can use their assets as collateral to raise capital for their productive enterprises. Within the household and other kin-based organisations, entitlements are very often governed by implicit rather than explicit contractual arrangements,

whose legitimacy rests on customary norms and practices rather than legally enforceable ones. Community-based entitlements, for instance, to the use of common property resources may also embody notions of entitlements that rest on accepted norms and customs rather than having a legalistic status.

<sup>3</sup> The phrase comes from Fraser (1989).

<sup>4</sup> Like other forms of socially-ascribed inequality, such as race, caste, ethnicity.

### 3 Tactics and Trade-Offs: The Social Construction of Agency

The multi-sited constitution of gender relations and gender inequality is a key theme of many of the contributions to this Bulletin. While households remain a significant location for understanding the gendered experience of poverty, the authors also document how intra-household relations reflect and help to shape the wider institutional environment. Hart's paper shows how attempts by neo-classical economists to take account of feminist insights into gender relations have resulted in a gradual move away from the artificial harmony of interests imposed by earlier household models to an acknowledgement of divergent preferences within the household and in 'degrees of patriarchy' beyond it. But she also points to the limits imposed by the 'predictability' imperative of neo-classical economics on the capacity of even these new, more socially aware models to grasp the complexities of power and the struggles through which power relations are contested. As feminist scholarship has demonstrated, rules and norms are not just exogenous constraints which help determine household outcomes, they are also resources which are drawn on in processes of negotiation. It is through their ability to define and interpret rules and norms that powerful groups have been able to legitimise their ability to command a disproportionate share of material resources. And it is through their contestation of this power that marginalised groups have sought to recover some control over their own lives. Indeed, many of the case studies help to illustrate how women and men from different social groups seek to draw on prevailing norms of gender identity to press for or withhold resources.

Gender asymmetries in intra-household resources and responsibilities, and the powerful norms of (dis)entitlement which underpin them, help to shape the differential ability of different categories of household members to gain access to extra-household institutions and hence to an expanded range of entitlements. In rural Karnataka, gender divisions in livelihood strategies and the domestic division of labour determine which children will go to school. In addition, however, while female seclusion is not a major issue, Subrahmanian's contribution suggests that the social risks attached to girls remaining unmarried beyond puberty added a highly gender-specific constraint on their

education. Departure from social norms of gender propriety constitutes a form of risk which poorer households appear to be unwilling to take on. Daughters consequently grow up disadvantaged compared to sons in access to labour markets and government employment opportunities. Women's primary responsibility for domestic work and child care also disadvantages them in the labour market: they are more likely to be confined to more casual and badly paid segments of labour markets and are less able than men to migrate in search of work when local opportunities dry up. Where norms of female seclusion prevail, as in West Bengal, Iran and Pakistan, added considerations come into play to further curtail women's work opportunities. However, caste and other forms of social inequality cut across gender differentiation in the labour market. Beall's paper, for instance, documents the social relation governing urban waste disposal in Bangalore and Faisalabad and notes how social norms which ascribe pollution, dirt and uncleanness to such work help to allocate it to certain marginal groups among the poor – women as well as men – who are considered to be born to do such work. Marginality is thus compounded by the equation made between stigmatising work and stigmatised groups.

Female seclusion also figures in Rogaly's account. He points out that while labour-intensive economic growth in West Bengal has improved employment opportunities for women as well as men, caste considerations have meant that not all women from poorer households have benefited. It has been largely women from scheduled caste and tribal groups, where norms of masculinity do not apparently rest on female dependence and seclusion, who have taken up these labour market opportunities, and very often as seasonal migrants. Interestingly, while Rogaly noted how norms of female seclusion in rural West Bengal help to exclude women from poorer households from employment opportunities in agricultural labour markets, Beall's study points out how similar norms in urban Pakistan have protected waged domestic work as a labour market niche for poorer women. The practical implications of seclusion norms clearly reflect local contexts and opportunities. Nevertheless, both studies also highlight that such norms can work both ways: to entitle but also to constrain. Even though gender and caste may serve to carve out labour market niches

for the marginalised poor, Beall suggests that many – and women in particular – find it hard to resist or to escape the exploitative conditions entailed. Quite apart from the various forms of market closures they face, norms of gender propriety and fear of sexual harassment serve to curtail women from fully exploiting even the limited niches open to them.

The normative and allocative activities of the state, of community-based organisations and of donor agencies also help to shape and reshape gender-differentiated structures of entitlement and disentanglement. As Chant points out in her contribution, child care responsibilities would not constitute such a major source of disadvantage for women in the labour market if public provision helped to compensate for the widespread dearth of male support within the household. She shows how the absence of such public provision impinges particularly on those female heads of households who, in the absence of a either male breadwinner or a wife, must combine a breadwinning role with domestic responsibilities. In Iran, according to Razavi, the explicit gender ideologies promoted by the Iranian state have accentuated labour market segmentation. Its normative emphasis on the male breadwinning role has led to active intervention to improve the conditions for male workers – through the enforcement of a minimum wage for instance – and indifference to the low wages and casualised conditions prevailing in female segments of the labour market. Hart documents how, in Malaysia, the attempts of the ruling party to counter the influence of militant religious groups have also led to the active promotion of a similar model of gender relations, premised on the male breadwinner and the dependent housewife. In addition, the government has poured resources into the countryside which have been channelled through various patron-client networks. It has been largely men from poorer households who have been included, and their female members who have been excluded, from these clientelist relationships of entitlement.

What are the implications of these gender-differentiated structures of opportunities and risks for choices that women and men face and the kinds of agency they can exercise? One implication is that women and men are likely to have very differing stakes in existing familial relations, to access

differing kinds of resources across institutional domains and to face differing structures of risks. Inasmuch as men are able to mobilise extra-familial resources to a greater extent than women, women tend to be more dependent on resources distributed through family and kin networks and invest a great deal more in maintaining these networks. And because the social management of relationships requires resources, poverty often introduces specific forms of instability into familial relationships, between parents and children as well as husbands and wives so that poorer women face different trade-offs between different dimensions of well-being to poorer men.

Lockwood's paper draws attention to the body as a resource for women, not simply as a source of labour as conventionally understood, but also as reproductive capacity. He shows how women in West African contexts draw on the uniquely female bodily capacity – the capacity to conceive and give birth – as a means of strengthening their claims on a range of possible kin. A 'successful' reproductive record is an important means by which women achieve a 'successful' life defined in terms of the quality of their relationships, both with their children and with a wider circle of kin. Conceptions, pregnancies and live births can all help to secure a woman release from heavy drudgery, more nourishing food as well as gratitude from her husband and his kin for having struggled on their behalf. However, such tactical manoeuvres can impose high costs on poor women. Scarcity of resources can lead to the denial of nutritional resources or the relief from heavy work necessary if women are to recover the 'blood and strength' lost through frequent pregnancies. This will undermine their future reproductive options should their present relationships break down. Gender and poverty clearly interact in creating a spiral of physical exhaustion and social marginalisation. Lockwood's paper also reiterates the importance of social norms in structuring the scope of action and opportunities for women relative to men: women appear to be able to access a broader range of social relationships in matrilineal and cognatic kinship systems than in patrilineal ones.

In Iran, growing prosperity generated by export-oriented agriculture benefited many households but has been a mixed blessing for their women

members. On the one hand, women have been able to withdraw from arduous manual labour in the fields but on the other, they have lost their independent sources of income. It was poorer women who were able to defy norms of propriety as a pre-occupation of the elite and to seek out opportunities for waged labour within their own villages and outside. Interestingly, one of the tactics used by women who have withdrawn from field labour to carve out some form of economic security is to demand a 'wage' from their husbands for processing their crops, a demand which represents a reinterpretation of Islamic norms of wives' entitlements for breastfeeding. In Malaysia, too, Hart points out how women from middle-income households generally abstained from the market and upheld the norms of the male breadwinner to press their claims on their husbands. Poorer women shrugged off the notion of the male breadwinner since few of their husbands could afford to look after dependent wives.

Gender norms thus have very practical outcomes, not only within the arena of family and kinship, but also in the wider social context. In addition, it appears that such norms have a particular relevance to the analysis of poverty in that they are often 'elite' constructions and hence carry special costs for the poor. Men and masculinity were clearly as much an aspect of this problem as women and notions of femininity. While the norms through which masculine identities were constructed often underpinned men's privileged access to jobs in the labour market, to state protection and to community based networks, they also led men to behave in ways which exacerbated family poverty. For instance, it was pointed out that men, even from very poor households, often forbade their wives and daughters to work for a living. Sylvia Chant suggests that this was one reason which explained why female-headed households are not always poorer than male-headed ones: they had lower dependency ratios. She also suggests that the disproportionate share of intra-household resources claimed by men for their personal expenditure, documented both in her study and elsewhere, could be partly explained as an attempt to bolster their sense of masculinity in contexts where such identity was undermined by repeated unemployment and chronic uncertainty. However, the costs of such behaviour are borne disproportionately by women and children so that the emergence of female-headship in her study

sometimes represented the decision by women to forego the higher level of resources that a husband potentially offered in exchange for exercising greater power over resources. In terms of their autonomy, and often in terms of household welfare, female heads could thus be better-off than they were in a male-headed household.

Drawing on her empirical findings from Malaysia, Gillian Hart offers an interesting version of the 'docile labour' argument which serves to remind us that such 'docility' is not an essential attribute of either gender but shaped by the norms and opportunities embedded in local gender-differentiated systems of entitlement. Whereas in much of the literature on the feminisation of the industrial labour force, it is women's docility that has been invoked by way of explanation. Hart points out how poor men's greater integration into local systems of patronage defused their incentive to pose a direct challenge to their employer-patrons, even when their interests as workers were under threat. She also points to the contradictions that poor men faced between the obligations of the male breadwinner inscribed in the models of masculinity promoted by state agencies and their own inability to provide for their wives. It was poorer women who, excluded from the male-dominated circuits of patronage, adopted a far more militant stance in their relations with their employers and in their attitudes towards notions of female dependency within marriage. Indeed, middle class men often contrasted their capacity to provide for their families and maintain domestic harmony with the tension and conflict among poor couples, which they attributed to the irresponsibility and inadequacies of poor men.

Chant also notes the disjuncture between normative obligations entailed in masculinity and the possibilities dictated by material realities. Thus while the 'good father' would in normative, legal and social terms, honour his economic obligations to his children, material conditions of intermittent unemployment appear to have produced a situation where women tend to assume responsibility for children themselves. Lockwood makes the point that poverty disadvantages men as well as women in their ability to manage their social relationships: poor men are less likely than wealthier men to successfully enforce their children's loyalty and are

more likely to be abandoned by wives who see the opportunity of more promising relationships elsewhere.

These contributions to this Bulletin help to point to an important limitation in much of the existing literature on poverty which has tended to focus on women's (or men's) poverty in isolation from the social relations in their lives. By contrast, greater attention is paid here to understanding how women and men negotiate norms, entitlements and relationships in contexts of scarcity. However, if gender norms imposed certain kinds of costs for poor women and men, because of their disjuncture with material reality, a number of contributions also provide evidence that these norms impose a different kind of cost on women from better-off households. One important point which comes out of Razavi's paper is that women's subordinate status within and outside the family can generate an insecurity which is not related to poverty or wealth or indeed to the actual likelihood of male abandonment. Indeed, contrary to some of the other contexts described in this volume, Razavi stresses the remarkable stability of marriages in rural Iran. Rather, such insecurity arises out of women's awareness of the vulnerability which goes with their status as economic dependents within the family. Thus while growing prosperity in rural Iran led to the adoption of urban, middle-class norms of female seclusion and the withdrawal of women from waged work, Razavi documents the series of strategies by which women sought to reassert some arenas of autonomy in their lives. Beall also cites the loss of autonomy experienced by some of the middle class women she interviewed for whom her ability to conduct research 'on the rubbish dump' was perceived as a metaphor for freedom. She points out how in some middle income households, women sought to derive an income from the sale of waste items, despite extremely low returns, partly to demonstrate their thrift but also to have some purchasing power of their own. Men from such households rarely demeaned themselves by association with waste. Rogaly too notes the greater autonomy and communitarian values among poorer scheduled tribe women compared to constraints imposed on the mobility of women from better-off households. In short, choice and status may diverge in women's lives in ways that they do not in men's.

## 4 Gender, Poverty and Development Practice

Unpacking the relationship between gender, scarcity and inequality helps to point to some of the methodological limitations of conventional approaches to poverty to capturing the ground realities of gender and poverty. Given the importance of social relationships, within and across households, in the lives of the poor, and of poor women in particular, both impoverishment as well as accumulation are likely to have a long-run, relational dimension which Lockwood suggests is likely to elude single-round expenditure or income surveys based on the household unit. Rogaly shows how the attribution of low female labour force participation rates documented in West Bengal census data to the practice of female seclusion misses both the significance of seasonal migrant labour – the census is carried out in the slack season while migrant female labour force participation rates are high in the peak season – as well as the caste/class specificity of seclusion – poor *adivisi* women, who make up the female labour force, do not observe *purdah*. Chant's paper challenges any automatic association between female headship and poverty. Her conclusion that female-headship is an indicator of extreme poverty in some contexts but not in others bears out Lockwood's suggestion that the analysis of social relationships in different contexts will help to differentiate between societies where women are marginalised and impoverished because they are outside relationships with husbands or children and those where they are marginalised within marriages and family networks. Razavi's analysis shows how improvements in household income and reductions in gender differentials in mortality – both positive indicators – fail to capture the loss of autonomy reported by women for whom improvements in household income brings greater seclusion. Indeed, it could be argued that greater attention to the voices of poor women and men would help to deconstruct the complex interlinkages between scarcity, gender and discrimination more effectively than any set of statistics. The preoccupation with the measurement of poverty in official policy circles may explain why the link between gender and poverty has so often been interpreted in narrow and misleading ways.

In addition, the analysis in these contributions points to the divergence between the very real

diversity in the interactions of gender and poverty in different contexts, on the one hand, and the uniformity imposed by the 'replicability imperative' in much of policy discourse, on the other. If there is a single collective lesson to draw out from the analysis, it is that despite the increased visibility of the category 'women in poverty' in the international agenda, there does not appear to have been a commensurate increase in attention to the realities of poor women, sensitivity to their constraints or respect for their priorities. Nor has there been much attention to how women or men view the apparent exclusion of male family members from official forms of entitlement (through the provision of women-only credit, literacy, training etc and the formation of women's groups etc), given that it is often poor men who have to deal with the emasculating contradictions between the norm of the male provider and the realities of male unemployment. Instead, what the contributions suggest is that the search for replicability has led to the formulation, design and delivery of a range of interventions which embody values, assume priorities, attribute benefits and require conditions which are far removed from the realities of those the intervention is purportedly intended to benefit.

Subrahmanian's paper, for instance, takes on the prevailing commonsense in Indian policy, as well as World Bank, circles that the benefits of formal education are self-evident to all so that low enrolment rates among the poor may be attributed to inadequate investment in the delivery of education services rather than to uncertainties about its benefits. She uses personal testimonies by women and men in low-income households in rural Karnataka to demonstrate how that their reluctance to invest in children's education reflected their perceptions about the payoffs to such an investment which were in turn grounded in the political economy of their own lives. Yet the educational system presently on offer takes little cognisance of these factors: in its timing, its location and its content, it embodies a model of time, space and knowledge which reflects the worldview of a westernised, middle-class, urban elite. However, restructuring the delivery of educational resources may still not overcome the 'risks' attached to educating girls. Here she suggests that greater investment in changing gender norms could have far-reaching effects and this is being attempted by Mahilya Samakhya, a government/non-

government collaboration which promotes literacy for poorer adult women, using feminist principles of collectivity and consciousness-raising.

Yates also challenges the 'self-evident' nature of benefits to education, this time in the form of literacy programmes for adult women in Ghana devised as one means of mitigating the social costs of adjustment in the country. She notes, in particular, two claims made about the benefits of literacy for women: technicist arguments linking investments in women's education with raised productivity and lowered fertility and Freirian arguments about its 'empowering' potential. However, despite an early commitment to learner-designed programmes, pressures to scale up and maximise targets led to literacy primers designed by Accra-based resource persons whose gender biases permeated the texts. While women's learning needs did receive more attention as the pilot phase progressed and the goal of empowering women was given greater visibility, Yates questions the values embedded within agency discourse which equated empowerment with literacy and portrayed illiterate women as poor, powerless, voiceless and 'dangerously' ignorant. Her own research in the area revealed a highly active but illiterate group of women fish traders who relied on oral, collective and contextual recording of their trading transactions and had little faith in formal book-keeping skills which male boat keepers often used to try to dupe them.

In addition, she also noted the 'unruly practices' embodied in the delivery of these literacy classes which served to subvert their stated goals of entitlement and achievement. The overwhelming predominance of men among the facilitators, the attitudes they expressed, the commitment to achieving numerical targets and the unrealistic assumptions made about the opportunity costs of women's time all added up to the exclusion of poorer, and the inclusion of more affluent, women. Also unsurprising in the light of Yates's observation of the content of the literacy classes, the attitudes expressed by the facilitators and the class background of participants is the divergence between how literacy was assessed by those who attended and the impacts assumed by the project. Rather than feminist empowerment or Freirian conscientisation, the acquisition of literacy was valued as a 'positional good', signalling social status,



knowledge of etiquette and domestic propriety. Greater attention to the needs of poorer women may not only have helped to reach them in larger numbers but may also have helped to challenge some of the values embedded in the delivery of literacy.

While both Hart and Yates point to the importance of poorer women's collective action around their interests as workers or traders, Harrison highlights the unintended consequences of the artificial imposition of group formation where the only apparent rationale for group identity is gender. Evidence of male membership in many of these women's clubs suggests that gender may not always be the most relevant basis for collective organisation and may indeed be over-ridden by perceived shared interests between women and men from similar economic backgrounds. Harrison points out how the association of 'clubs' with donor assistance in a number of African contexts has lent office holding and membership the characteristics of a 'positional' good, which is associated with modernity, donors and status and which can primarily be afforded only by members of better-off households. She also offers examples of how a divergence between official rules of membership entitlement and the unofficial practices of implementation served to exclude poorer sections of the local population.

Her paper supports one of the underlying themes of this Bulletin, namely that apparently similar phenomenon will have quite different meanings in different contexts. While different forms of collectivity have been promoted by feminist activists as well as those working with the poor as a way of building solidarity and organisational strength, women's groups which are imposed on a population as a vehicle for poverty alleviation may serve the interests of their members up to a point but may not necessarily meet the intended policy goals. Solidarity either emerges out of self-evident shared interests or it has to be built up over time through the exploration of potential affinities of interest, but the idea that it can be imposed by policy fiat is clearly untenable. The apparent assumption that women will somehow fall 'naturally' into group-based activity ignores the material forces which makes for competition between women. While the poorer women that Hart writes about in her paper were landless waged labour who could use their

collective strength to bargain with wealthy landlord-employers, and the women Yates writes of were independent traders who used collective methods to bargain with middle men, the poorer women in Harrison's study worked on family-based agricultural production as members of conjugal units. For them, there were few economic gains from cooperating with women from other households.

The difficulties of implementing a gender-equitable land reform in the post-apartheid era documented in Meer's paper echo some of the earlier points made about the gap between official rules and actual practice. Although the Department of Land Rights has written gender into some of the key measures through which land is to be redistributed, no provision has been made to ensure that this will occur. Given that women are generally more likely to be rural than urban, illiterate rather than literate and constrained by patriarchal norms and domestic responsibilities compared to men, without additional efforts at outreach, Meer points out that they are most likely to be sidelined in the distribution process.

As should be clear by now, the key message from this collection is a challenge to the universalising tendencies of official development discourse: its construction of the composite 'poor Third World woman' and of simple, universalistic solutions to her needs. Jackson's paper returns us to a more critical universalism, one which recognises that local social relations embody not only the most positive aspects of local culture but also its most negative and oppressive aspects, and which insists on a broad framework of basic human rights as an essential step towards restoring gender politics to the poverty agenda. Taking on a particular genre of postmodernist argument which sees all attempts to tackle poverty and gender discrimination as manifestations of the colonising mission of development and the relegation of Third World cultures to the status of the inferior 'other', Jackson challenges this simplified division of the world between 'the local' as the site of truth and 'the universal' as its denial. Meanings and entitlements are indeed constituted by, and embedded, in localised social relations and so they will also embody the inequalities, divisions and conflicts which characterise local realities. There is no reason why the struggle to give

meaning to the notion of human well-being should incorporate, rather than transcend, these local inequities. But, as Jackson suggest, this would move us in the direction of a model of objective interests which subjects the idea of the local to the same critical deconstruction as the idea of the 'universal'.

The political dilemmas embedded in this discussion between locally constituted realities and overarching inequalities, between the 'manifested' and the 'underlying', are not confined to 'official' policy making bodies, but encompass a range of social movements and women's organisations who are pursuing the goal of gender equity in development. The dilemmas involved are aptly illustrated by considering some of the broader political issues raised in the papers by Gillian Hart and Shamim Meer. As Hart notes, purposive efforts to channel resources to poor women often have unpredictable consequences which have little to do with intended goals. They may be used by women to strengthen their bargaining position *vis-à-vis* other family members or overt control over such resources may be surrendered to male family members, while covert control is retained and used it as a means of enforcing norms of male responsibility. However, even allowing for this unpredictability, it is probably the case that if the discursive and material practices embedded in re-allocative efforts do little to expand the range of identities and opportunities available to women – to expand the terrain of struggle, in other words – the underlying structures of gender disadvantage are likely to remain intact and so continue to throw up new forms of old inequalities.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the problem with attempting to tackle these deeply-entrenched, underlying structures, as Meer points out in her discussion, is that they are not constituted singularly but are bound up with other forms of inequality and legitimised by long-standing practice. In the context of South Africa, there are considerable ambiguities in how women's land rights should be formulated, given

that poorer rural African women share a need for secure tenure with male family members, given their joint exclusion from any rights to land in the past, but at the same time, experience gender-specific insecurities attendant on their dependence on male family members: 'The issue is clearly complex. Land reform cannot be made conditional on ending a patriarchal system that has been in place for centuries. But not to challenge it is to lose a critical opportunity. The question is how' (Meer citing Hornby (1996), this volume).

This fundamental question 'how' encapsulates a number of dilemmas. How can women's shared interests with men – of their family, of their class, caste or ethnic group – be reconciled with those strategic interests which arise out of gender-specific modes of economic marginalisation and social devaluation? How can a sensitivity to the bleak 'trade-offs between different forms of privation' that poor women must make be reconciled with attempts to tackle the deeper structures of their subordination which may go against their expressed priorities and make terms of their trade-off even bleaker in the short-term? And, finally, how can one devise transitional strategies which help to bridge what is possible in the short term with what is desirable in the long term?

These are large questions and the contributions in this volume can only go some way towards answering them by pointing to the need for a more empirically-grounded and politically-nuanced approach to the overall project of gender equity. In addition, it is important to note the question raised by Meer regarding the appropriateness of different kinds of agencies for the task of tackling deep-seated, culturally-sanctioned forms of gender inequality, when many of these agencies do not have the long-term commitment, the sustained contact or even the local level knowledge necessary to see the process through. This question has a wider resonance. In an era where a range of different organisations –

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<sup>5</sup> From an advocacy point of view, we have found that Molyneux's 'practical/strategic' distinction (Molyneux, 1985) lends itself usefully in helping to try and disentangle the more visible or 'surface' manifestations of subordination and its deeper underlying causes, and hence to bridging the gap between need-based approaches and justice-based ones (Kabeer and Subrahmanian, 1996). While the more immediate

manifestations of gender asymmetry, and the practical imperatives which they may give rise to, are simplest to respond to on political, administrative and indeed humanitarian grounds, unless such responses also go some way towards addressing the underlying structurally-entrenched causes of gender inequality, within and across class divisions, these deeper inequalities will re-surface in new forms

bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, governments, women's organisations, non-governmental organisations, social movements and political parties – all claim to be working for women's empowerment, some limits to public intervention into the most intimate and personal arenas of relationships in people's lives needs to be kept in mind. Given the potential for forms of intrusiveness which many of us would not tolerate in our own lives, we need to constantly to review the politics of 'comparative advantage' of different kinds of agencies when it comes to questions of women's 'empowerment' and 'autonomy'. While democratisation, accountability, transparency, participation and a basic respect for human rights are desirable characteristics for all interactions between people and organisations in

creating an 'enabling' environment, some organisations may be best suited to campaigning for a broad human rights framework, others to the effective delivery of basic resources and services in ways which do not reinforce dependence and yet others, who are committed to a longer-term and ground-level engagement, to take the struggle for human rights into everyday life. But in all this activity, it is important to remember that some space must be allowed for women themselves – in all the diversity of circumstances in which they live – to negotiate their own versions of autonomy on terms which they themselves find acceptable. Interventions which do not recognise this may end up becoming just one more set of constraints on women's struggle for self-empowerment.

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Family, Households and Women's Empowerment in Bahia, Brazil, Through the Generations: Continuities or Change?

Cecilia M.B. Sardenberg

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**Abstract** This article identifies changes and continuities in gender relations in a working class neighbourhood in Salvador, Bahia, through the generations. Based on data collected over a period of nearly 20 years, it seeks to identify processes of women's empowerment. It confirms the relevance of women's economic independence to their participation in decision-making and in gaining autonomy; it gave them the *power* to assert control over their own lives. To this end, female solidarity has also played a special role, propitiating the exercise of *power with* to bring about the desired changes in one's lives. However, neither economic independence nor female solidarity alone seems to have automatically led to conscious 'gender rebellion' and a break with traditional roles in the family. This only becomes possible when new values and attitudes in favour of alternative models, such as those proposed by contemporary feminisms, gain greater expression.

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## 1 Introduction

Those who visit Plataforma today may not realise that, in the past, it was a workers' village, home to one of the largest textile mills in Bahia. At the foot of the hill on the waterfront, the remains of the factory are now hidden away from the eyes of visitors. Until the late 1950s, first impressions of Plataforma would have been very different. Access to the neighbourhood was by train or by boat, disembarking the incoming visitors at the gates of the old factory. While conducting my doctoral research in Plataforma in the late 1980s, a newspaper article prompted me to take the train and I was able to see the community from a totally different angle. Dominating almost its entire front view, from side to side, rose Fábrica São Braz, its dirty yellowish façade framed by immense palm trees hovering upon the waterfront. Everything else – the church, the school, the roofs on the rows of little houses encrusted in the hillside – crept behind the old factory, as if they were merely outgrowths on its upward sloping backyard.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was often in and out of Plataforma doing my research

(Sardenberg 1997a), which dealt with gender, class, and power in Bahia, based on the testimonies of former factory workers and their memories of work in the factory, their families and everyday life in the neighbourhood. Plataforma and other similar *vilas operárias* were not simply places for people to find employment, but also settings in which 'men and women fell in love, married, reared their children, and retired in old age' (Hall *et al.* 1987: 114). Housing was available so long as tenant families provided labour to the mill. But who and how many in these families should actually work in the mills, or who would share in the fruits of their labour, taking care of the other needs of the household, has depended not only on the whims and vagaries of global economies and local labour markets, but also on the composition of the households in question and on the needs, capabilities, and the preferences of their members (Parr 1990).

At Fábrica São Braz, the principles of the patriarchal family model (Borges 1992) were observed insofar as the chain of command and

the payment of lower wages to women and youngsters were concerned (Sardenberg 1997a). In Plataforma, the 'traditional' gender divide with its ensuing distinct roles for men and women – though often transgressed and/or redefined – was the basic principle in the organisation of the family-households, as well as for the socialisation of children in the community (Sardenberg 1997a). However, by relying primarily on the employment of women and youngsters, policies at Fábrica São Braz undermined patriarchal authority in the domestic sphere. Because more women were likely to work at the mill than men, most company houses in Plataforma were rented out to women. Likewise, it was usually women who provided basic food staples acquired at the company store. In these households women assumed *de facto* positions as heads, particularly as men were more likely to have irregular incomes. Yet, while employment at the factory guaranteed a more regular income for women, wages were never high enough to meet household needs and therefore children had to seek employment. This contributed to the weakening of conjugal ties and to the formation of matrilocal extended households.

My original work in Plataforma had focused on the testimonies of the older generations – the people who worked in the factory – and only on a small sample of families. Would these forms of family and household organisation be true for younger families as well? During 2004 and 2005, I had the opportunity to coordinate another study in the same neighbourhood, based on a survey of 259 families headed by men and women of different age-brackets (Sardenberg and Gonçalves 2005). Since 2007, I have been coordinating a third project in the neighbourhood, in which 353 women of different generations have been interviewed (Sardenberg *et al.* 2008). Many of these women are members of the same family-households surveyed in the 2004–5 study, and some of them had also been part of my original research in Plataforma. Although these three studies had distinct objectives, timelines and data, it is worth drawing some comparisons, particularly insofar as change and continuities on family-household organisation and gender relations through the generations are concerned. This article seeks to do so, focusing in particular on identifying processes of women's empowerment, that is to

say, the processes by which women gain autonomy and make important decisions concerning the course of their lives and of their families (Kabeer 1999).

## **2 Family-household organisation and female trans-generational solidarity**

The records of the Fábrica São Braz reveal a predominant presence of women in their ranks. In 1945, women represented 85 per cent of all workers, rising to 91.2 per cent working on the production lines. The female contingent of workers in the factory was quite homogeneous: 84.5 per cent were black, 49.7 under 25, 82.8 resided in Plataforma, and 40.3 per cent were born in that neighbourhood (Sardenberg 1997b: 22–3). Successive generations of women – mothers and daughters – worked at Fábrica São Braz, sometimes side by side.

Interviewing former factory workers, women and men alike, it came to my attention that close to 80 per cent lived in houses inherited from their mothers – some even from their grandmothers – who had taken possession of these homes at a time when only families working at the factory could inhabit them. In addition to homes, some women also inherited the position of head of household. When I met them in the 1990s, more than half were responsible for households that brought together two or more generations of mothers and daughters whose partners and sexual mates passed through their lives, and who bonded to bring mutual help and support in raising their children and grandchildren.

In Plataforma, this type of household seems to have a long history among the families of the former factory workers interviewed, the ownership of the houses and responsibility for the families passing from mothers to daughters even when husbands and partners were integrated into the domestic groups involved. More importantly, from the information I was able to obtain from the testimonies, these groups could be characterised as *matrifocal extended families* of more than two generations, constituting what we may identify as informal *matrilineages*.

Given the importance of women's work in the factory and for the households in question, it would be fair to say that female-headed households, whether matrifocal or not, or with or without the presence of husbands and male



partners, probably found significant expression throughout the history of the factory in the neighbourhood. As Katia Mattoso (1988) and other historians (Borges 1992; Santos 1993; Ferreira Filho 1994) have shown, in the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth, female-headed households were already common in the poor parishes of the city of Salvador. In the case of Plataforma, these households were often formed by desertion of mates, and expanded by children of their daughters' children, who remained at home and sometimes had their partners coming to live with them – thus becoming part of a female-headed extended household.

Several factors seem to have been at play in the formation of these households. The basic one was the financial inability of men to set up a household of their own. Rental facilities were not easy. The company had ceased to build new housing for workers and the existing ones were usually occupied. Land was available for the building of houses, but this was a project to be accomplished over a period of many years, sometimes over a lifetime, and difficult for young couples to start. It was easier to build an extension to an existing house, even a company house. This also figured as a strategy for abiding by company rental policies. Moreover, these households had previously depended on the pooling of financial contributions of all able members – sons and daughters – and could not afford to do without them, especially as the mothers aged and their productivity slowed. At the same time, daughters now had children of their own. If they were to continue working at the factory – as nearly all women like them did – and guarantee the company house and the wages to maintain it, they would need their mothers' help in caring for house and children, establishing a trans-generational cycle of mutual help between mothers and daughters. This mutual dependence of mothers and daughters contributed to the formation of matrilineal – and matrifocal – extended households.

While all these arrangements tended to the needs of the households and individuals involved, they were not immune to conflicts. As roles of *pai de família* (husband, breadwinner, decision-maker) and of *dona de casa* (housewife, homemaker) – complementary roles, in the idealised nuclear family household – became

muddled. In a situation of matrilineal extended households, however, there would be more than one individual to fulfil each of these roles, and thus a cause for dispute and conflicts. In Plataforma, mothers remained as heads of their households and the central figure of authority in the family. This strained relations between the conjugal pairs living under their authority and household administration. Their daughters' mates could not fulfil the role of *pai de família* expected of them, especially as their unstable jobs and meagre earnings did not enable them to become the sole providers. This contributed to the weakening of conjugal ties and the greater dependence of women on their female kin group.

### 3 Plataforma in the twenty-first century: women and families

As noted, my study in the early 1990s focused on former factory workers, the older population of Plataforma. Most of the homes I visited then were female-headed extended households. However, it was a very small sample, and it centred primarily on workers' memories of family life in Plataforma, when the factory was still in operation. The subsequent larger survey conducted in 2004–5 (Sardenberg and Gonçalves 2005) permitted the identification of some trends regarding household composition and organisation in Plataforma.

We found that households varied considerably in terms of their internal organisation, from single-dweller households to those composed by three generations or collateral extended families. Of the total households visited, three generation extended families were still very common in the neighbourhood, constituting 27.4 per cent of the households surveyed. Not surprisingly, we found some very large households, one of them, in particular, headed by a 69-year-old retired woman was composed of 14 people, including eight children and three grandchildren. Although such large households were exceptions – households in our sample averaged only four to five people – close relatives, adult daughters and their families often lived in the same building, or in an extension. This is a common arrangement in poor neighbourhoods in Salvador; as children grow up and begin their own families, the houses 'grow' either up, with new floors being added, or 'out', that is, by extending the house into the backyard. The new additions eventually become independent dwellings; as a popular saying

affirms: 'Those who marry want a home away from home' – even if, due to economic constraints, 'away' means just a different floor of the house (Sardenberg 1998). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the 'nuclear family-household', composed of a heterosexual couple and their children, the traditional ideal model of the family in Brazil, corresponded to less than one quarter (24.3 per cent) of the households visited.

Our 2004–5 survey confirmed trends that have been observed for Brazil as a whole among the working classes: (1) a significant proportion of female-headed households and their greater vulnerability; (2) the tendency for female household heads to live without partners, and to be older and have less years of formal education than their male counterparts; (3) the sizeable percentages of these women who are retired or receiving pensions; and (4) the equally considerable proportion of these women who have to support unemployed adult children and their spouses as well as grandchildren, with meagre retirement and pension benefits. Within the last three decades, the marked increase in the percentage of households headed by women represents one of the major changes observed in census data as well as in official household surveys (PNAD) in Brazil. For instance, whereas in 1992 these households represented only 19.3 per cent of the total, by 2002 this percentage had risen to 25.5, an increase in the order of 32.1 per cent. This increase was much more pronounced in urban areas, and particularly marked in metropolitan areas in the northeast and north regions, where the proportion of women-headed households was in the order of 35.1 per cent and 35.2 per cent, respectively. Among the metropolitan regions surveyed, the Metropolitan Region of Salvador (RMS) showed the highest proportions: 32.9 per cent (IBGE 2002). Similar studies have also shown that even though increases are to be found in all strata of the urban population, these proportions tend to be even higher among the poor population (DIEESE 2004). Our 2004 survey of Plataforma confirmed this trend. Women-headed households represented 44 per cent of the sample, a figure much higher than the national average of 25.5 per cent (IBGE 2002), even for Salvador (32.9 per cent).

Our survey included a set of questions about division of labour, distribution of financial responsibilities, authority and decision-making

within the family-households – such as over who decides about children's education, where to live, who should work within the group, how the earnings of household members should be spent. The results obtained indicated that, whereas financial responsibilities and decision-making were commonly shared almost equally by women and men, even in those households that had a 'male head', domestic tasks – including caring for children, those ill, and the aged – were still treated as women's responsibility. These trends remain. However, women are now complaining about this unfair situation.

#### **4 Women's empowerment?**

In the last two years (2007–9), we have been conducting a new study in Plataforma as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC).<sup>1</sup> This study aims to identify and analyse changes in women's lives over the last three generations, and how these changes relate to processes of women's empowerment, looking at educational opportunities, paid employment, political participation, family relations, and expression of sexuality, as well as how changes in each of these aspects of women's lives may bring changes to the others. We went back to our sample of households surveyed in the 2004–5 study, but interviewed only the women, working with a sample of 353 women, ranging from 15 to over 90 years old.

Of these women, 25.8 per cent were identified as household heads without a partner, 36 per cent as spouses, 30 per cent as mothers or daughters, 6.7 per cent as other relatives, and 1.4 as non-kin related members. Among those identified as 'spouses or partners', nearly 66 per cent affirmed that in their homes, they and their husbands/partners shared the position of being heads. These findings gain greater relevance when we consider that, until 2003, it was still stipulated in the Civil Code (sanctioned in 1916) that the husband/father was the head of the household.<sup>2</sup> The new Civil Code, sanctioned in 2003, establishes the possibility of shared household leadership. Were the women interviewed simply responding to the change in legislation, or is the Code merely catching up with a change of values and attitudes regarding women's roles in the family?

Our survey also included sets of questions regarding distribution of financial responsibility

and authority within the households. Our findings indicated that the women interviewed are not only sharing decision-making within their households, particularly with husbands/partners, but also seem to exercise a high degree of 'autonomy' regarding the course of their own lives. Although 15.3 per cent affirmed that they faced resistance on the part of family members (48 per cent of them from husbands and partners) when they decided to find work outside of the home, they did it anyway. In addition, 70 per cent stated that their economic contribution to their families is highly regarded, and 58.9 per cent believe that this contribution has made a difference in the way other household members regard them. Moreover, over half of the respondents (50.4 per cent) believe that their financial contributions to their families have earned them respect within their communities.

A significant proportion – 54.4 per cent – of the respondents stated categorically that they have 'total control' over their lives, while 34.4 per cent affirmed that they had 'considerable control'. For the majority (59.5 per cent) of the interviewed women, marriage is no longer a 'safe port', 98.3 per cent affirming that it is very important for women to have their economic independence. Yet, at the same time that nearly 60 per cent believe that work does not affect a marital relationship or may have a positive effect on it, an equally high proportion (60.1 per cent) are ambivalent insofar as relationships between 'working mothers' and their children are concerned, thus expressing traditional beliefs regarding work and motherhood.

This is consistent with the finding that 96.6 per cent of respondents affirmed they were responsible for performing domestic tasks in their homes, including caring for the children. Although an equally high proportion stated that they share the responsibilities for these tasks with members of their families, the overwhelming majority (90.4 per cent) of them do so with other women, with mothers and daughters in particular. As in the case of the former factory workers, so too the women interviewed more recently are closely bonded to their mothers and daughters for mutual help and support in accomplishing chores, caring for children and the elderly, and finding assistance in moments of need.

## 5 Three generations of women and their pathways to empowerment

Although it is possible to find a significant correlation between age and values in that the younger generations tend to express more 'progressive' values and attitudes regarding women's empowerment, this is not necessarily always the case. 'Dona' Nora constitutes such an example.<sup>3</sup> At 63 and now retired, she is still very vocal about women's rights and has sought a college education for her daughter and the means for her 14-year-old granddaughter to continue a successful career in international karate competitions. A native of Plataforma, daughter of a canoe boatsman (*canoeiro*) and a laundry woman (*lavadeira*), she was raised in a family that included factory workers. She started work young, helping her mother with the voluminous weekly wash. She earned pocket money carrying lunch meals to factory workers from their homes, some of them leaving her leftovers in the pots. 'We were very poor,' she states, 'sometimes I went to bed on an empty stomach.' Dona Nora went to live with her sister to care for her nephews and nieces so that the sister could go to work. This allowed her to witness her sister falling victim to constant acts of domestic violence at the hands of her brother-in-law, a situation that, she claims, made her never want to be married herself. And she never did. But she loved children, she says, and eventually adopted as her own daughter her brother's little girl called Lara, now 36 years old with a daughter of her own with whom Dona Nora lives.

Although she barely completed elementary school, Dona Nora took over a preschool that was founded by an older sister, working as its head for nearly 40 years. She says that in spite of the fact she could barely make ends meet (and could not even buy a house for herself with her meagre earnings), she is proud to have been able to give her daughter a college education, and thus the means for her daughter's empowerment. Nevertheless, unlike her adopted mother, Lara married young and lived in an abusive relationship. When her own daughter 'Dora' was seven, she finally decided to walk out. By then, she had finished college with her mother's support, earned more than her husband, and could not find any reason to remain by his side. She left carrying only her and her daughter's clothes and went back to live at her mother's

home. At present, she supports her mother, ever since Dona Nora was forced to close the school. Dona Nora and her daughter Lara are both now directing all their energies towards finding sponsors for Dora. 'She is going places,' affirms Dona Nora, 'she will be an Olympic champion.'

## 6 Change or continuity?

In considering changes in women's lives in Plataforma over three generations, it must be stressed that what we found here was not unique to this area – not at present, nor in the past. Despite the absence of systematic studies of working class families in Bahia during the first half of the twentieth century, there is much to indicate that home life among the populace departed in many important ways from the model of the family upheld by the local elites. Contrary to the general principles of this model, for instance, 'illegitimate' births resulting from consensual unions predominated among the working classes of Salvador. Consensual unions were the rule, not the exception among the working classes (Borges 1992). The precariousness of men's jobs made it difficult for them to establish their own households and/or to assume the role of sole providers. Women's contribution to the domestic budget thus became fundamental, granting them greater economic independence, which laid the basis for a more symmetrical relationship (Chalhoub 1986: 137–44). Studies of working class families in Rio de Janeiro, for instance, have shown that women there also contested the authority of the husband/father (Besse 1989), often counting on the support of other women in their families in staging their insubordination (Chalhoub 1986: 150). And, like Plataforma, this situation was more common in those instances in which the young couples, due to economic need, were forced to live with relatives. As such, observed Claudia Fonseca, '... the nuclear units were diluted in these consanguineous groups where strong, long-lasting loyalties contrasted sharply with the precariousness of conjugal ties' (1989: 105, my translation).

Families thus tended to be organised primarily around a mother and her children. 'The mother was the center of this family, though the father might visit, or even live with them in the household' (Borges 1992: 48).<sup>4</sup> Matricentrality and matrilocal residence were mutually reinforcing, giving rise to matrifocal families and

granting women greater relative autonomy and independence than women of the elites. The relatively high frequency at which this seemed to occur among the urban working classes all over Brazil, has engendered speculations concerning the sociocultural dimensions of the observed patterns. Even if, on the one hand, they can be seen as adaptations to socioeconomic conditions (or as 'strategies for survival'), on the other, the regularity in which they seemed to occur suggests that some principles for organisation were in usage. Dain Borges (1992: 48), for example, suggested that these arrangements constituted a distinct model of the family that 'had a long tradition in Brazil' – one that has been especially strongly associated with the Afro-Brazilian population (Landes 1947). But he is not clear as to what kind of 'model' it would be: a simply statistical model or a normative model, that is, a recognised, conscientiously upheld set of principles for family-household organisation?

One could say, then, that among the urban working classes, an alternative model of family-household organisation was at play. Yet, this model needed not be 'normative' but instead a *modus operandi* – or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1977: 72) – of urban working class families in Brazil. In this case, this 'alternative model' would not imply a rejection on the part of the working classes of family ideals (and the ensuing gender roles) espoused by the elites. As Maria Clementina P. Cunha suggests: 'It is more likely (...) that the same claustrophobic role of the bourgeois woman operated as a parameter of aspiration and of vindication for the popular classes, earmarking a horizon of rights to be conquered' (1989: 144, my translation). Indeed, evidence to that effect is to be found in the discourse and struggles of organised labour. From the late nineteenth century onwards for instance, labour unions in Brazil and other spokesmen for the working classes – whether actually espousing these ideals or instead putting them to work on their behalf – have consistently fought for a family wage, thus claiming the right to constitute stable, conjugal families organised around the gender divide instilled by the bourgeois model. Of course, the thesis that the 'alternative' model of the family put to work among the working classes in Brazil represented in the past a conscious rejection of bourgeois ideals is certainly enticing to socialist-feminists (such as myself). Nevertheless, as Eunice

Durham poignantly indicates, all available studies and records suggest that, to the frustration of Brazilian radical intellectuals, workers in Brazil have been not only 'extremely attached to the family', but also that:

... (they) express a generalised preference for a sexual division of labour on traditional modes, that is, that which subordinates women to men and tends to restrict female activities to the domestic sphere. At the same time, they also tend to appreciate the traditional virtues of respect and obedience of children towards their parents. (Durham 1980: 201–2, my translation)

From the perspective of women workers, the non-fulfilment of bourgeois gender role ideals has often been translated into the burden of a double day. For these women, in particular, the constitution of matrifocal families, without a stable male provider, has represented '...a result of poverty, an overload of misery, the impossibility to achieve a minimally decent life instead of a sign of better and freer forms of relations between the sexes' (Durham 1980: 203, my translation).

This seems to have been the case of the women of Plataforma in the past. Among the factory workers I interviewed in the 1990s, even women who were raised in and constituted their own matrilocal extended households and assumed the role of heads as major providers, enjoying a certain independence, were still betrayed in their discourse, which revealed unfulfilled aspirations for the realisation of those ideals. They were not unaware of the contradictions between these ideals and their own life experiences. Indeed, when women asked, 'Why do I need a man that can't even bring me a bag of flour?', they were justifying the 'alternative' paths their lives have taken, precisely in terms of the gender roles intrinsic to bourgeois family ideals. This does not seem to be necessarily the case for the women in our most recent survey. Women in our sample have chosen to end abusive relationships, and some not to marry at all. In the case of Dona Nora and her daughter (and granddaughter), for example, the formation of their female-headed household appears to come as a result of gender resistance and rebellion. Professional, middle-class women in Salvador are exercising agency, both in ending unsatisfying relationships and

constituting female-headed (and matrifocal) families (Macêdo 2008), as well as in choosing to remain single and live alone (Tavares 2008).

However, in the case of Plataforma as well as in other poor neighbourhoods of Salvador, processes of women's empowerment regarding family relations are being slowed, if not entirely diverted, by the growth of evangelical churches.

The 2000 Population Census showed Brazil as primarily a Catholic country – 73.8 per cent of the Brazilian population. Yet it is considerably less Catholic than it used to be. Along with Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian religions have lost much ground to Evangelical Christianity, particularly among the poorer and dispossessed, gathering a faithful flock especially among women (Prandi 2003; Bohn 2004). In the survey conducted in Plataforma in 2004, we found that 36.9 per cent of women heads of household, as opposed to 26.1 per cent of male heads, were Evangelical Christians. Among the women interviewed more recently, the figure had risen to close to 40 per cent declared. These religions tend to preach fundamentalist values and be much more conservative than the others, especially insofar as gender relations are concerned: most of them advocate women's obedience to their husbands and a traditional division of labour.

## 7 Final considerations

Taking into consideration the findings from the different studies discussed here, it is possible to see some patterns continuing over time regarding women's empowerment in the sphere of gender relations within the family. The most obvious, of course, is the relevance of women's economic independence to their participation in decision-making within the home as well as in terms of autonomy. That is to say, both in the past as well as in the present, economic independence, particularly from partners, seems to have contributed significantly towards women gaining the *power to* assert control over their own lives, including in ending relationships that fall short of fulfilling the established ideals. To this end, female solidarity, particularly from women kin, has also played a special role: it has propitiated the growth of the exercise of *power with* to bring about the desired changes in one's lives, as witnessed in the case of Dona Nora's support to her daughter and granddaughter. However,

despite their relevance, neither economic independence nor female solidarity alone seems to have automatically led to conscious 'gender rebellion' and a break with traditional roles in the family. I contend that this only becomes possible when new values and attitudes in favour of alternative models gain greater expression. Indeed, as indicated in the responses of the women we interviewed more recently, there seems to be a new discourse – a feminist

discourse – about women's roles and women's rights finding expression among working class women in Brazil. This, we may say, is contributing to the growth of self-esteem and self-confidence – of the *power within* – among these women as well, of which Dora's Olympic aspirations are a good example. But only time will tell if this new discourse will hold its ground against the rise of religious fundamentalism brought by Evangelical Christianity in the neighbourhood.

## Notes

- 1 See [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org)
- 2 This clause was maintained, even though the 'Statute of the Married Woman' passed in 1962 granted married women greater autonomy.
- 3 In order to preserve the privacy of everyone interviewed in the course of this research, their names and other characteristics that can be used to identify them have been changed.
- 4 This was illustrated in a report prepared by a famous local paediatrician for the governor of

the State of Bahia in 1924. The report indicated that among 3,091 youngsters registered with the agencies assisting poor children run by the Bureau of Child Hygiene of the City of Salvador, 54.28 per cent were illegitimate. In addition, 31.28 per cent had fathers who were either absent or unemployed while the overwhelming majority – 94.17 per cent – had working mothers (Ferreira Filho 1994: 23–34).

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**





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# Introduction: Quotas – Add Women and Stir?

Mariz Tadros

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**Abstract** Quotas have become increasingly popular as a fast track option for securing enhanced political representation largely because of their proven impact on increasing the number of women in parliament. As more countries have adopted one form or another of the quota, it is now timely to reflect on what the implications have been for transforming gender relations and the nature of politics at large. This introduction examines from the country case studies presented in this *IDS Bulletin*, the insight offered into the dynamics of motorways and pathways of increasing women's decision-making power (with or without a quota) and the underlying assumptions about gender, power and politics as well as the policy issues for consideration.

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## 1 Introduction

Exactly ten years ago, at the Millennium Summit, world leaders announced a commitment to reducing extreme poverty through a series of time-bound targets encompassed within the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with a deadline of 2015 (UN 2006a). The third MDG was to promote gender equality and empower women and the 'proportion of seats held by women in national parliament (IPU)' was set as one of the key indicators for its achievement (UN 2006b). As the MDG Review Summit meets in September 2010 to assess progress, this is an opportunity to consider whether the proportion of women in parliament continues to be the most adequate proxy for women's political empowerment.

Fifteen years ago, in September 1995, the Beijing Platform of Action called upon governments to 'take positive action to build a *critical mass* of women leaders, executives and managers in strategic decision-making positions' (UN DAW n.d.). The critical mass for lobbying was established as at least 30 per cent of seats to be occupied by women in parliament. Some 25 years ago, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (UN 1985) put forward a broad and highly political goal enshrined in paragraph 51: 'The political commitment to establish, modify, expand or enforce a comprehensive legal base for the equality of women and men and on the basis of

human dignity must be strengthened'. These international platforms have had an immense influence on the national contexts. It is striking that in virtually every country case study presented in this *IDS Bulletin*, there is reference to international frameworks, whether the MDGs, the CEDAW, the Beijing Platform of Action or the Nairobi Conference, in some capacity. Domestic engagements with gender and politics have been informed by international discourses, policies and programmes on approaches to women's political empowerment, both on local, regional and national levels. From the articles presented in this *IDS Bulletin*, this has manifested itself in multiple ways: on a policy level, it has influenced the choices of policy demands being advocated by activists; it has featured as a yardstick against which activists measure their own realities; a lobbying point for change (advocacy for national government compliance with treaties it has signed to or international norms it purports to); or as an entry point for bilateral or multilateral policy dialogue on gender issues. Donor-supported programmes aimed at helping countries put international frameworks in action have also both shaped the practical focus of efforts to empower women politically, as well as generated much controversy about their relevance, contextual appropriateness and effects. In view of both the overt and more nuanced ways in which international policy places emphases (such

as getting the numbers right as a way of redressing imbalances in gendered political representation), this *IDS Bulletin* hopes to contribute to the debate about understandings of gender and political power.

In recent years, the message for addressing gender inequalities in politics has focused on redressing the imbalance in the number of women and men in parliament. The quota has been gradually moving centre stage as the channel for women's accession to political decision-making power, largely because it has proven to increase numbers and because it has challenged the notion that countries in the South should pursue the same linear path of development that the Nordic countries have taken, should they aspire to have similar gender equity in parliament. Professor Dahlerup argues that:

A dramatic change has taken place recently in the global rank order of countries based on their level of female political representation. As a result of quota provisions, Rwanda, Costa Rica, Argentina, Mozambique and South Africa are now placed very high in the world league of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The five Nordic states, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, which for a long time were virtually alone at the top of the ranking table, are now being challenged. Although controversial, the electoral gender quota has proven to be a highly effective instrument for achieving equality, provided that it is implemented properly (Dahlerup 2003: 1).

This *IDS Bulletin* issue is devoted to exploring what the quota has meant as a motorway to women's accession to political power. It draws on research findings from the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium ('Pathways'),<sup>1</sup> as well as a series of articles based on presentations given at a special seminar in the Brazilian National Congress co-convened by Ana Alice Alcântara Costa as part of the Pathways programme, and contributions from other country case studies. The articles presented here are diverse in their geographical setting, political level they focus on, context, and experiences. Julie Ballington presents an analysis of global trends in women's political representation in parliament, and the diversity in political paths pursued. Clara Araújo writes from Brazil and Montserrat Sagot from Costa

Rica, demonstrating two different results from the application of quotas at various administrative levels within these Latin American countries. From South Asia, country case studies on the path to, and the application of, quotas at the local government level are presented from Bangladesh by Sohela Nazneen and Sakiba Tasneem; from India by Divya Sharma and Ratna Sudarshan, and from Pakistan by Saba Gul Khattak. From sub-Saharan Africa, Hussaina Abdullah writes on the struggle for women's political leadership in Sierra Leone in the context of the absence of a quota, and in contrast, Juliana Kantengwa explains how Rwanda became a world leader in achieving gender parity in parliament. From the Middle East, Islah Jad reflects on the Palestinian experience at the local government level, Mariz Tadros on the recently applied quota in Egypt, and Sara Abbas on gender politics and how they played out in Sudan. Finally, Sarah Childs presents a thorough gendered reading of the recent elections in the United Kingdom. The types of quota discussed within these articles also vary from party proportional lists in Brazil, Costa Rica and Rwanda, to reserved seats in Egypt, and all women party lists in Sudan and the UK. The political-historical trajectories of these countries dramatically differ: Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Sudan are post-conflict settings, the Occupied Territories is a context of ongoing conflict, Brazil and Bangladesh are post-dictatorship contexts, Costa Rica, India and the UK are consolidated democratic regimes and Egypt and Pakistan are authoritarian regimes under pressure to democratise. Reflecting upon the country experiences conveyed in this *IDS Bulletin* and beyond, Ana Alice Alcântara Costa shares her reflections on what the quota has meant for the way in which gender and political power have been understood and engaged with theoretically, and in policy.

The aim of this *IDS Bulletin* is to bring new empirical and conceptual insight from the Pathways programme and beyond to an audience of development academics and policy actors who have become familiar with the proliferation of different forms of affirmative action, but who are interested in interrogating the politics behind the quotas in all their complexity and nuances. It questions some of the prevailing assumptions behind what motivates actors to adopt quotas, it discusses the different political pathways of

breaking through the ceiling for women to reach political office, whether with or without quotas. Finally this *IDS Bulletin* raises questions of who are the women who are best positioned to benefit from the quota as a fast track option, what are they enabled to do once in office via the quota seats, and what kind of gender agendas does the critical mass of women who have come to power via the quota espouse and advocate?

## 2 Dynamics of introducing quotas: beyond gender equality

Quotas increase women's representation in parliament, yet what these articles show is that neither *the actors nor their motives* for adopting affirmative action are necessarily easy to identify. In many cases, the introduction of the quota is not an expression of feminist agency but a coalition of actors who have a vested interest in forwarding a particular agenda. In the case of the Occupied Territories in Palestine, Jad reveals that the quota emerged as a consequence of an alignment of several actors' agendas: Western donors, the Palestinian leadership (Fateh) and a women's coalition whose leader had strong links within the ruling regime. In Rwanda, the Transitional Government of National Unity, which was a coalition of eight political parties, was determined to advance a socially and politically progressive agenda in a post-conflict context and gain legitimacy with a majority women population, and it had backing from international actors, as well as support from various forms of women's actors and coalitions. Many of the articles presented in this *IDS Bulletin*, hence support Krook's contention that:

the adoption of gender quotas does not always stem from principled concerns to empower women in politics. Rather, most quota policies are the result of combined normative and pragmatic motivations, pursued by varied but multiple groups of actors who support reform for various and often conflicting reasons. As these constellations vary substantially across cases, the relationship between gender quotas and feminist projects of empowerment remains an empirical question, not a theoretical given (Krook 2008: 355).

The motives for adopting quotas are just as diverse as the actors. Khattak's historical analysis of the Pakistani context shows that three military regimes instituted local government reform as a

means of deepening and extending their political patronage system, and therefore control over the political process: General Ayub Khan (1958–69), General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–88) and General Pervez Musharraf (1999–2008). The latter was responsible for introducing the 33 per cent quota for women in local government in 2000. These same regimes' introduction of highly reactionary legislation in other spheres suggests that supporting local participation in local government, including that of women was not necessarily part and parcel of championing a women's rights' agenda. For example, under Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation politics, which saw a reversal in many of the achievements that women had gained previously, women were denied their fundamental right to equality in legal matters and rape and murder were recognised as compoundable private crimes.

Abbas' account of regime engagement with the quota in Sudan also points to the introduction of quotas by highly undemocratic regimes to undermine the power base of their opposition as well as to make a statement about their modern credentials. For example, in 1968, Nimeri's government reserved 40 per cent of the seats in the National People's Assembly for women, professionals (which could of course include women), the armed forces, the business community, and other groups that the regime saw as critical in combating the stranglehold of the traditional sectarian parties on rural psyches. Yet the same government also repressed independent women's activism, calling into question its commitment to advancing a gender equality programme. The Salvationists too, who came to power and represent the current regime would adopt highly inhibitive measures against women under the guise of instituting the Sharia law, while increasing women's political representation in parliament (though as a co-opted, pro-government force), and introducing the country's most recent quota.

These examples, and others in this *IDS Bulletin* suggest that since the quota can often be introduced for complex motives and accompanied by highly inhibitive policies, it should not be seen as a proxy for assessing a country's commitment to democratisation or principles of gender equality. Consequently, the terms of assessing a commitment to women's political empowerment need to be expanded by,

for example, looking at the gender agendas advocated, discourses, types of legislation enacted, and scope for the active participation of feminist voices (of both women and men).

### 3 Negotiating the terms of the quota and beyond

The form of affirmative action adopted in any particular setting is often an outcome of processes of bargaining and mediation between different stakeholders with different political interests; its full implications for transforming politics (in all kinds of directions) is highly contextualised and dependent on a configuration of a multitude of factors. In much of the literature, the virtues of the proportional representation system are deemed as creating the most enabling conditions for women and for representation of political forces (Childs, this *IDS Bulletin*), yet the articles here suggest that many more factors influence how power is mediated (Costa Rica before the implementation of sanctions; Brazil, current context; Egypt in the 1970s). As observed by Dahlerup (2009: 25):

It is not just about the electoral system, but how the electoral system works with a constellation of other factors that are crucial for creating an enabling environment. Rwanda, Sweden and Costa Rica represent some of the best cases of gender quotas. They have all achieved a very high level of representation of women. They also represent three different types of electoral gender quota. Rwanda has reserved seats, increasingly based on elections. Two women must be elected from each district. In Rwanda, 56.3 per cent of parliamentarians are women, making it the number one in the world. Sweden has voluntary quotas for party candidate lists. Parties on the left practice ‘every second a woman’, that is, a 50 per cent voluntary party quota for candidate lists. Right leaning parties do not have quota rules, but to a large extent also alternate male and female candidates on their lists. In Sweden, 47.3 per cent of parliamentarians are women, making it number 2 in the world. Costa Rica has a legislated candidate quota of 40 per cent for all parties.

The diversity in contexts, quota types and electoral systems presented above bears a strong policy message: there are no technical fix-it solutions for arriving at the most perfect type of quota that would create the most enabling

conditions for women to claim political power. Certainly, there are very important lessons learnt regarding the need to introduce systems of thorough and rigorous sanctions for non-compliance, as Ballington, Sagot and Araújo argue in their articles. However, in order for these sanctions to be highly effective, they will need to be introduced in other areas as well, such as setting a ceiling for election campaign financing and punishing those who violate it (this is likely to impact many women whose financial resources tend to be more limited, but also have positive equity implications for society as a whole, if implemented well). Other sanctions which are also likely to have a positive gendered impact apply to the use of violence, where it has become engrained in electoral political cultures.

Mechanisms for enforcement and accountability shaped by and designed for local realities and contextual nuances are just as important as addressing the legal loopholes manipulated to avoid application of affirmative action legislation. And for all such processes to work on the ground, the policy focus should not only be on getting the institutional mechanisms right, but on strengthening the capacities of local non-partisan actors who are committed to a holistic approach to gender equality. This would evidently call for a discerning approach to those that advocate gender justice in contrast to those that champion the quotas for instrumental political purposes. Articles in this *IDS Bulletin* indicate that a strong women’s movement plays an important role at the design and implementation stages of the quota. In Rwanda, Kantengwa indicates that the presence of various forms of women’s coalitions, strong feminist organisations, and the institutionalisation of effective national machineries all worked together to help set the conditions of a form of quota that would work. In Sierra Leone, Abdullah shows that the 50/50 campaign, the women’s parliamentary caucus, and the feminist movement have not only pushed for the institutionalisation of affirmative action but have used their considerable bargaining power to put forward the terms of the quota they deem as appropriate, from their historical and political experience.

The positive correlation between feminist activism (in its many forms) and enhanced capacity support for women’s political agency also emerges concretely from the India and

Bangladesh case studies. In India, Sharma and Sudarshan point to the power of collective feminist agenda enacted through the Uttarakhand Mahila Parishad – UMP (Uttarakhand Women's Federation), a women's movement working in the hill villages. The UMP is a network of around 450 women's groups (Whole Village Groups or WVGs), spread over villages in seven districts of Uttarakhand. Many women members of the WVGs have moved on to contest and win the positions of *gram pradhan*, ward members and block development committee members in the *panchayat* (village council) elections of 2008. The WVGs nurtured women's leadership, both on a collective as well as individual level, and through a long process of engagement:

Women have over the years acquired the confidence and also the aspiration to affect change through politics and to influence the development agenda. The monthly meetings of the groups have created a space for collectively identifying needs, planning activities, allocating tasks such as cleaning pathways, common village spaces, plantation activity and resolving conflicts that arise within the village (for instance on trespassing cattle, distribution of water, etc.)

In Bangladesh, Nazneen and Tasneem discuss how women who were directly elected to the reserved seats in the Union Parishad (the lowest administrative unit of the local government) urged the women's organisations to raise these issues in different forums on behalf of women members. Conversely, in cases where the women's movement espousing a feminist ideology becomes too weak or fragmented (Sudan at the time of the negotiation of the terms of the quota and Egypt during the process of designing and deliberating the quota), the ultimate outcome is far from what is desired.

From these articles, several positive roles of an engaged local feminist movement can be inferred, including lobbying for policy and legal reform, liaising with international women's actors for knowledge and experience sharing to inform local policy, extension of financial help for women candidates who have limited financial means, support in constituency building, capacity support for candidates and MPs, among a few. However, there are several other areas that

provide further opportunities of engagement with the political process for the feminist movement. Abbas argues that in the case of Sudan, a dialogue is needed among women activists from the opposition and the women who have just come to office in the elections of 2010 (all government affiliated) to find scope for engagement on the gender agenda. There are several key policy issues here, including the need to address the disconnect between the feminist movement and various power elites in parliament and government in order to open an avenue for engagement, and possible influence.

Moreover, in negotiating the terms of the quota, one emerging policy area of research is the question of constituency and its centrality (or lack thereof) of how women come to power. In Bangladesh, Nazneen and Tasneem found one of the supporting factors which empowered poor women who were elected into office in local government (Union Parishad) was that they felt they were empowered to represent, and be a voice on behalf of those who elected them. As one female UP member pointedly said:

*Oh, they in the parishad say, '[W]hy does a poor woman have such a loud voice? Who is she?' and I remind them, I was elected directly by people in three wards. I am there to represent their views. I have as much right to speak as they do.*

(Interview, UP member 2, Pathways Digital Story Workshop, 20 November 2009).  
(Nazneen and Tasneem, this *IDS Bulletin*)

In Egypt, Tadros highlights the concerns that the conditions of the quota system would delegitimise the importance of a constituency as the pathway to political office. More research is needed about whether women and men engage in constituency building in gendered ways; how class, wealth, political affiliation and forms of community engagement – and the constellation of all of the above in different contexts – influence the types of constituencies that are forged; and the extent to which different kinds of quotas inhibit or encourage constituency relationships as the pathway to power.

#### **4 Pathways and highways of women's accession to political power**

One of the emerging issues in this *IDS Bulletin* is that while quotas do increase women's numbers in parliament, they are not exclusively the only

pathway to political power. The case studies here contest the hypothesis put forward by Tripp and Kang that ‘All else being equal, countries with quotas have higher rates of female legislative representation than countries without quotas’ (2008: 346). It may be that quotas do increase women’s presence in parliament, if a before and after methodological approach is taken. However, a cross-country comparison suggests a more nuanced perspective. Ballington’s contribution on ‘Implementing Special Measures’ does reveal that 20 of the top-ranked 26 parliaments use electoral quotas or reserved seats. However, it is also significant that some of the remaining six, which do not have quotas are also very highly placed in the list. For example, Cuba ranks fourth, with 43.2 per cent of seats occupied by women, and Finland ranks sixth, having 40 per cent of parliamentary seats represented by women.

Abdullah’s research on Sierra Leone shows that in the 2002 parliamentary elections, women won 18 seats, representing 14.5 per cent of members of parliament – without any kind of affirmative action in place. In Egypt, the highest ever percentage of women in parliament (9.7 per cent) was in the parliamentary round of 1979 (23 June–20 March 1984) when there was a reserved seat quota in place. The difference in percentage of women in parliament between the two countries is quite significant (almost 5 per cent) with the non-quota implementing country faring better. This is not to suggest that quotas are unnecessary (women activists in Sierra Leone continue to struggle to get affirmative action) but it does caution that it would be reductionist to focus on the quota as the only, ultimate pathway to political office. Other effective pathways also need to be considered in tandem with the quota.

It is also important to consider how to prevent the quota from becoming a stalled highway to more women gaining political power due to ineffective implementation. In Brazil, Araújo shows how the quota improved women’s representation when it was first applied, but then reached a plateau because, while the law stated there should be a minimum of 30 per cent per sex of the total number of candidates, it also stated that the lists for each party could be up to 150 per cent in relation to the number of seats available for each state. Hence, the quota is calculated not on the actual list of candidates,

but on the potential list. Araújo points out that since parties do not have that many candidates, they end up leaving 30 per cent of the seats vacant for women, and rarely fill them. The impact is that the quota has had a maximum ceiling rather than a multiplier effect on increasing women’s representation in parliament, for example, in 2006, the numbers of female candidates and females elected remained around the same as they had in 2002. Sagot also presents an account of how counter-strategies had to be deployed in Costa Rica when political parties exploited the existing legal loopholes in the electoral law in order to avoid introducing major changes to their gender hierarchies. This lends further support to the idea of not only redressing inconsistencies in the quota system, but also complementing it with other strategies of enhancing access to political power.

A clear theme emerging from many of the articles which look at enhancing women’s pathway to political office, is the question of capacity support. Capacity support features in a number of ways, most commonly in the form of training, but also financial support and constituency building. It is also provided by a variety of actors, including NGOs, governments, national machineries and political parties. Pre-election training, in particular by NGOs, has been one of the most popular forms of capacity support provided for women and features in many of the country case studies examined here (Rwanda, India, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Sierra Leone, Pakistan and Egypt). NGOs providing training has been seen as one way to deal with the significant inequities in women’s access to knowledge about political processes, campaign skills and leadership before and after elections. Nazneen and Tasneem’s interviews with women elected in the Union Parishad, a significant majority of whom are active in the local *shalish* (informal arbitration local committees), point to the space created by these formal provisions, supported by various NGO and women’s organisations’ training programmes, providing relevant legal and human rights training.

On the other hand, several studies indicate that the short cycle nature of the training is an issue: a government nationwide survey of elected women representatives (EWRs) in India, cited in Sharma and Sudarshan’s study, showed that just over half received training/orientation. Of those

wishing training, 82 per cent said the training was too short. The project cycle associated with the provision of training by NGOs may further compound the problem of the lack of sustained learning opportunities provided.

Jad's study of pre-electoral training for women running for local council elections in the Occupied Territories revealed that, while the women's movements and NGOs played an important technical role in training and equipping women for political office with skills such as running an election campaign, leadership and knowledge of the electoral law and local council, once these women were in political office, the training was not sustained. Jad believes that part of the problem is that the funding is for a limited project cycle, which disrupts the continuation of support for women later in their political career. In many respects, the findings from some of the case studies support Morna's observation that:

... initiatives have tended to have a short-term focus on women as candidates rather than on the ongoing support they need in office, or on retention and even exit strategies. There also tends to be a focus on how to run campaigns rather than on how to be effective agents of change. The methods used have tended towards traditional, top-down training, rather than a support approach. Some of the more innovative approaches to adult learning, such as expert on-the-job support, coaching and mentoring, or study and experiential visits have not been used as effectively as they might. Capacity building has almost exclusively focused on empowering women in decision making rather than on what men need to do to share these spaces and to become agents of change. (Morna 2009: 44)

Since many of the capacity building and training schemes are funded by donors, there are relevant policy messages here in terms of shifting the focus from short-term training programmes to longer-term learning initiatives that are diverse in approach and content, sustained during, after, and in between elections and that are more participatory in nature. More comparative research is needed, however, to determine the different capacity building approaches applied in different contexts, for different types and levels of political engagement in order to discover

which programmes effectively support women's political pathways.

Further research is also needed in how to engender these programmes so that they do not continue to focus exclusively on women as the 'target beneficiaries'. We also need to examine the appropriateness of different actors as channels for increasing the capacity of candidates. Childs' examination of the training extended by the equality promotion strategy by political parties in the UK shows it has been subject to three main criticisms which speak to the problem of targeting women:

First, aspirant women candidates are known to declare that they, 'don't need any more training'; second, training women to compete according to the current rules of the recruitment game does little to unpack parties' assumptions about what makes a good candidate (Harrison 2006); and finally, training candidates may be insufficient to negate selectorate discrimination against women. Other equality promotion measures, such as the provision of financial assistance, take on greater significance where the cost of fighting party selections is high. (Childs, this *IDS Bulletin*)

Childs points to the importance of financial assistance and this is echoed by other case studies where feminist movements and NGOs funding was critical for enabling candidates to overcome hurdles to participation. Some donors are fearful of extending financial support to candidates on the premise that it is a form of partisan political engagement; however, there are many innovative approaches to making the process open, fair and transparent that can be gained from the field.

## **5 Quotas for women: a highway for whom and to do what?**

Much of the focus in the literature has been on what kind of quotas work best to increase women's political representation in parliament. With over two decades of sustained efforts to support the quota, it is now timely to examine what kind of women are coming to power under the quotas. Abbas reveals that in Sudan, where all women party lists were implemented in the most recent lower house elections this year (2010), the ruling National Congress Party



(NCP) won *all* of the 112 women's seats in parliament, and the majority of the state legislative council seats. In the light of the NCP's long history of a highly reactionary engagement with gender issues, it remains to be seen the extent to which this critical mass of NCP women will deviate from the party line.

The question of who is coming to power via the quota is very pertinent in the light of the changes in political parties' engagement with 'the woman question'. Historically, Left leaning parties have been the most committed to fielding women and introducing internal party mechanisms to break the glass ceilings inhibiting women assuming leadership positions (also inferred from the case studies presented here, e.g. Brazil, Occupied Territories, Costa Rica, Egypt and the UK). However, more recently, Right wing parties and forces have also been increasingly fielding women who are politically affiliated. While no generalisations can be made about the way in which they exercise their agency within the party nor about the agendas they espouse, there is a pressing need for comparative country studies of the performance of women from right wing parties where they represent the larger proportion of women in parliament, and where they have reached office through the quotas.

The agenda that is in question is not only the gender agenda, but more broadly, the social justice agenda. Many of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* show a concern for elitist women coming to power (see Kantengwa, Sagot, Tadros and others). Sagot points out that in Costa Rica:

the passing of the quota legislation has also meant the arrival into power of many conservative women, closely connected to political and economic elites, who do not have any progressive agendas and who, in fact, act as strong opponents of the feminist movement, particularly on those issues related to sexual and reproductive rights.

She gives the example of the discussions on the Bill to Criminalise Violence Against Women in 2007, in which the President of the Congressional Women's Commission<sup>2</sup> in charge of analysing all law proposals related to women's issues, disagreed with the Bill, arguing that, on many occasions, women provoke family violence and the important thing was not to create more privileges

for women, but to preserve the sanctity of the family.<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, women legislators expressed their opposition to a Bill that proposed an eight-hour work-day for domestic workers, arguing that they could no longer participate in politics if their domestic workers did not work extended hours. Rosita Acosta, president of the Domestic Workers Association, told these women legislators at a public hearing, 'What you want is a slave and not a domestic worker'.<sup>4</sup> With more and more women from different political forces coming to power via the quota, this is an appropriate time to test the contention that 'improving women's legislative representation is crucial to addressing women's strategic political needs' (Lindberg 2004: 30). Since the last decade has brought to power or consolidated the power of highly conservative regimes, we need comprehensive, comparative research on how this has translated into women's agency through parliamentary outputs, implementation and having a wider social and political effect.

## 6 Future policy directions

The focus in recent years through international frameworks on building momentum for the adoption of quotas has had important ripple effects. With more women in parliament today than previously, this is an opportune moment to broaden the policy messages on two fronts. The first is to identify other key power bases (e.g. key ministries) where gender hierarchies have remained unchallenged. Parliament has been the focus of much policy advocacy aimed at increasing women's political decision-making power, which is justifiable, given the persistent levels of gender inequality (17.9 per cent of women on average worldwide in 2010, as highlighted by Ballington's article). However, parliament is not the only site where political power is exercised, and hence the need for a contextualised understanding of the different sites and pathways in which power is reproduced. The implications of keeping the debate strictly on political decision-making in parliament is that a piecemeal approach is applied, offering limited opportunities for greater transformative change in how power is exercised.

The second front in policy directions is to examine not only how many women are in any parliament, but what kind of gender agendas they have espoused and what has been their influence on social and gender justice issues. The quota, like all policies and measures aimed at

promoting gender equality, can be instrumentalised by forces for whom gender empowerment is secondary to other goals (i.e. giving the semblance of being modern or progressive or democratic) or conversely, for those with highly reactionary gender agendas. It is critical therefore that the policy focus goes beyond the representative dimension of gender parity in parliament to examine how the critical mass is engaging with gender issues, and what kind of legislation is advanced. The implications of stopping at getting the numbers right is that we may end up, inadvertently, legitimising, in some cases, the promotion of agendas antithetical to gender justice under the guise that they have been advanced by women. It may also mean that in practice, one of the policy directions is not only to support parties with the largest number of women but those who have supported the most progressive gender agendas in parliament, even if the advocates are a group of gender-sensitive men as well as women.

Since one of the pathways most sought for women's political empowerment is to provide capacity development for the enhancement of their skills and abilities to field the electorate process or undertake their duties once in office, this is an ideal time to undertake a comprehensive context-sensitive comparative study of the providers, the approaches, and the implications on the ground for communities where such initiatives have been pursued. From the articles presented here, we can glean subtle messages about where there is a pattern emerging in response to initiatives implemented. Successful ventures, which have proven to be particularly powerful are cross-country experiential learning visits. These allow participants to expand horizons and see issues and processes from different perspectives. Moreover, the articles here also suggest that reimagining capacity support as entailing long-term learning processes rather than a series of short training opportunities will also strengthen the ability of these programmes to deliver. It will also help in recognising that pathways to political power require an investment in a sustained process of support rather than being seen as a pre-election ploy to fast track women to political power.

There is an emerging need for unconventional approaches for enhancing capacity that recognise the need for context-sensitive approaches and that recognise the need for both individual as

well as collective strategies of engagement (e.g. finding appropriate ways, where relevant, of integrating men as partners in women's leadership programmes). This may 'target' those who are considering political office, but it may involve targeting key influential actors in the community, who if joined in a coalition would play an influential role in creating an enabling environment for challenging gender hierarchies. Recognising the need to provide capacity support to engage in the informal political realm not just the formal institutions, such as enhancing the ability to liaise and build relationships between the women's movement and political actors within parliament and other sites of influence and power, is also significant.

Finally, despite the richness of the case studies presented in this *IDS Bulletin* and the wealth of rich literature on the effectiveness of quotas, we know very little about where the opportunities for learning by doing politics (apprenticeship possibilities) lie. Certainly political parties have been rightfully the site of policy influence, however, in light of the complexity of regime types and changes in the political economy, we need to capture what other avenues have been influential in different contexts. For example does leadership in local government act as a stepping stone to national representation? What about engagements through non-governmental organisations? And feminist movements? And right wing religious and social movements? These questions are not only likely to influence policies adapted with respect to the nature of local capacity building initiatives but also how we conceptualise pathways and highways to political power. The quota may have been the motorway through which women rose to power en masse, and its contributions to changing the gendered face of parliament cannot be underestimated. However, it is now time to also consider policy emphases equally on other pathways, that may not necessarily represent fast track options to power, but which are significant for political empowerment. These pathways may be slow sometimes, such as building strong constituencies or investing in the younger generations of gender sensitive men and women and they cannot be 'fixed' through external incentives such as a quota, but they can represent in and of themselves, opportunities of transforming gender hierarchies, not just in their outputs but through the very processes that are walked.

## Notes

- 1 'Pathways' is an international research and communications programme established in 2006 and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, working in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Sudan, and in global policy spaces.
- 2 Legislator Gilda González from the Partido Liberación Nacional.
- 3 Information provided by Gabriela Arguedas, former legislative aide.
- 4 Information provided by Rosita Acosta, President of the Domestic Workers Association.

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Beyond the Mantra of Empowerment: Time to Return to Poverty, Violence and Struggle

Uma Chakravarti\*

## 1 Introduction

Since the middle of the 1970s, dual processes have raised, with renewed vigour, the question of women's development – or the lack thereof – in the public domain in India: the movement for women's autonomy and rights, and policies of the state specifically targeting women. Both processes were given a fillip with the publication in 1975 of the *Status of Women Report*, which drew attention to the abysmal indices of women's development: declining sex ratio and declining work participation in particular. But the reaction of the women's movement, which was already under way when the report was published, was very different from that of the state. The movement confronted the structures of patriarchy and class, which were understood to be directly responsible for the grim conditions under which women existed, while the state, with its characteristic paternalism, sought to bring women into the development process, while castigating them for remaining outside the process through their own inertia and backwardness.

This article will explore the conflicted relationship between the women's movement – with a specific location in feminism – and other people's movements on the one hand, and the changing policies of the state on the other, through an in-depth analysis of three programmes – the Women's Development Programme (WDP) in Rajasthan, the Total Literacy Campaign (TLC) in Andhra Pradesh, and the focus on self-help groups (SHG) in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The three programmes also represent three moments in the recent history of 'women's' development in India.

## 2 The Women's Development Programme (WDP)

The critical question for the women's movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s was the mode of development adopted by the post-colonial nation-state in India and the focus of all democratic movements was to highlight the categories of people who were excluded from the 'gains' of development. A number of issues were thrown up: was growth happening, was the trickle-down theory working, was inequality diminishing or growing, and what was happening to the weakest segments of society within the process of development – *dalits*, *adivasis*/'tribals', the poor and women?

At the same time, the women's movement in particular was raising and confronting the issue of violence in the everyday lives of women. This violence against women was understood to be located at many sites – the family, the community and the state, and was perceived to be a major obstruction in 'development' as a process.

For all of these reasons, when the opportunity arose in the mid-1980s to collaborate with the state in an innovative women's development programme in Rajasthan – the WDP – a section of the women's movement was drawn into it. The autonomous women's movement conceptualised violence against women as a critical element in the working of patriarchy and had contributed to the reactivation and energising of the older women's groups affiliated to left political parties. It functioned in a sense as the 'think tank' of the broad range of women's groups constituting what may be termed the left-democratic women's movement. Activists saw the Rajasthan programme as a means of

reaching out to a large number of women, especially in the rural areas, who were not easily accessible to the largely urban centred, middle-class base of the autonomous women's movement.

As the WDP unfolded in Rajasthan it came to be popularly called the '*Sathin*' programme as it was the *sathins* who came to be the lifeblood of the programme. I have written about this programme elsewhere in some detail (Chakravarti 2005), so I will restrict myself to the issues raised by the functioning and later the collapse of the programme.

Begun with great creative energy, the WDP tried to bring the state, women's groups, and research agencies together to reach out to the grassroots. It would identify women from the poorest and lowest segments of rural society – as they were the worst affected by the violence of both patriarchy and 'claste' (caste and class) as a young friend from Bihar terms it – as the 'agents' of change. They were to be called the *sathins*, meaning compatriot or friend.

The *sathin* was first to undergo a rigorous and intensive person-centred training to 'become' the agent of change. Empowerment was not yet the buzzword (it emerged in the 1990s in UNDP circles), so the thrust of the training was a process of change whereby women would take control over their own lives giving them a measure of autonomy and agency in transforming the lives of other women like them. *Sathins* later recalled the heady days of these training sessions when women like Aruna Roy and Kavita Srivastava (who have been active in the right to information campaign and the civil liberties movement apart from their engagement with the women's movement) lived and participated with them in a workshop as resource persons/trainers, both challenging them and building confidence and understanding which they have put to great creative use for over two decades.

The WDP linked three levels of the administration: the village, the block, and the district. This meant that while there was only one *sathin* in a village, she drew upon the strength and resources of other *sathins* from villages from her own neighbourhood, and located across the state, as well as block and district level women in the WDP and most importantly, the official governmental administrators. This had great effect – the energy came from the women in the WDP and the legitimacy and clout

with the police and other agencies came from the administration. In the early stages of the programme, this resulted in a successful chain of linkages which was further enhanced by a newspaper brought out by the *sathins* that built awareness among women through its circulation in those districts that had introduced the WDP. In addition, every village with a *sathin* held a village level meeting of all the women to identify issues that needed to be taken up. The *sathin* of the village was to pursue these and take them up to the collective of *sathins* at the district level.

According to the narratives of the *sathins*, the WDP recognised the centrality of violence in the lives of women and hence occupied a major chunk of their activities. There were cases of extreme violence – rapes, 'domestic' violence, incest, forced incarceration – apart from the denial of rights to food, resources and healthcare. Innovative strategies were used to reach women who were secluded under cultural taboos but often also incarcerated under the diktats of family patriarchs.

For example, on one occasion a street play was performed at the doorstep of a house where a daughter had been 'imprisoned', depicting the same situation as that of the daughter. Tension filled the air and there was danger of violence against the *sathins*. Finally, the mother of the girl was moved to join the women at the doorway. That broke the fear and tipped the balance with the audience as a number of other villagers came out to join the protesters/rescuers. Another woman had been locked into a crude improvised undergarment so that the husband secured her chastity during his absence from the village and was rescued by *sathins*. The rape of a woman was sought to be 'settled' through a decision on the matter by the patriarchs of the village: the *sathins* refused to accept this and a criminal case against the accused was filed – and there were countless stories of this kind that *sathins* and block level activists of the WDP recounted to me as they described the early workings of the WDP in the years 1986–9.

Soon, however, contradictions surfaced: during the early discussions in the workshops with the *sathins* in the WDP, two issues emerged as critical in the lives of poor women: land – or the need for productive resources; and health.

The denial of land and the demand for it was regarded by district level officials of the government and the district level non-governmental organisation (NGO) as too sensitive and so was quickly dropped. It was decided that the issue of health could be taken up as it was 'less political'.

But, as it turned out, everything that is an area of critical concern to women's autonomy is bound to be regarded as political. Trouble began when the *sathins'* understanding of bodily autonomy conflicted with that of district officials and those higher up in the government administration. During a severe drought, the administration linked participation in the food-for-work programme of the state to accepting sterilisation in order to further family planning targets. The *sathins* protested about this and were severely reprimanded. The *sathins* discovered that not only did the family and community 'own' women's bodies, so did the state. At the same time, the *sathins* raised economic and political demands such as minimum wages for all, including themselves, secure tenure like other government functionaries, and the right to form an organised collective.

The power hierarchy that the *sathins* brought under their scrutiny, the issue of minimum wages, and the resistance to the linking of food to compulsory sterilisation, pitted the *sathins* against the state and its limited notion of development. The WDP collapsed; government officials decided that the 'heady process of discovering themselves' had led to the 'loss of the maturity required to play a low key role' among the *sathins* in development – which is perhaps all that the state had intended all along.

Over the 1990s, the programme was, in the words of the *sathins*, 'slow poisoned', and remains a shell of its former self. New programmes have replaced the *sathin* as the agent of change with groups of women (drawn notionally from all castes but in practice eliding the lowest castes), which are increasingly turned into self-help groups, an issue I will deal with in the last section of this article. The problem of violence against women has simply dropped off the radar screen; while the *sathins* have faced severely restrictive and even punitive measures from the state they were celebrated as the model of successful empowerment in Beijing by the very same government in order to claim kudos for itself! Back home in Rajasthan, the government continues to deny minimum wages and a stable tenure to the *sathins* on the ground that they are illiterate.

From being active agents in the struggle against patriarchy, caste and class inequalities, the *sathins* have been reduced to becoming extension workers who are chased by every line department to execute every government programme – from enrolling girls in school, to backing the pulse polio campaigns, and fulfilling government targets for whatever programme is currently being implemented, whether it has anything to do with women's development or not.

The *sathins* and activists of the women's movement have also learnt a harsh truth: the state has the power to initiate a development programme and to bury it when it chooses. Women are either recipients of development, or instruments, never agents of development as they understand and conceptualise it.

### 3 The Total Literacy Campaign (TLC)

The 'fact' of the illiteracy of the *sathins*, which was used against them to deny them rights, forms a useful linking point to move on to another important campaign intervening in the arena of development: the literacy campaigns of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Total Literacy Campaign was a government campaign, but its emphasis on the mobilisation of the masses gave it many elements of a new radical measure. The campaign was inspired by the success of post-revolutionary literacy campaigns in Cuba, Guinea Bissau and Nicaragua, and Paolo Freire's 'conscientisation' was for a while the buzzword in government circles.

The TLC also coincided with the beginning of the era of liberalisation and other major structural changes in the Indian economy. Nevertheless, for middle-class activists the campaign appeared to be, for various reasons, a space to work with government. The 'space' theory created a new kind of optimism among intellectuals and women's groups who were critical of the 'cynics' for what they called their 'endless suspicion' about the role of the state (Saxena 2002: 74).

But, as was soon to become apparent, working with the government had its contradictions. Even in its ideological rhetoric, now centred on 'empowerment' rather than on redistribution of resources, the latter was at best Janus-faced. Not surprisingly, the campaign reinforced official stereotypes about the underprivileged, holding them responsible for their own condition through rampant and irresponsible



reproduction, as well as suggesting that literacy would end exploitation and poverty. Advertisements in the media played upon this theme endlessly – a woman domestic servant being liberated by learning how to sign her name and open a bank account, to live happily ever after through the paternalistic efforts of her mistress; or a little street urchin learning how to read the alphabet and running away onto the road to freedom. The emphasis on the functional skills of literacy and numeracy thus masked and trivialised the complex social reality in which the poor and the excluded were placed and the structural conditions that placed them there. By focusing on individual self-improvement it reinforced a specifically neoliberal notion of empowerment.

And yet there appeared to be great possibilities in the TLC. The content of the syllabus for adult learners is necessarily different from that of conventional school syllabi and since the TLC included a component of building self-reliance through 'awareness-building', such that the neoliterates would become aware of the causes of their deprivation, and move towards amelioration through organisation and participation in the process of development, it drew large numbers of young volunteers to join the campaign – much like the Nicaraguan *brigadistas*.

Unfortunately however, the model as it unfolded in India relied heavily on district level bureaucracy. Furthermore, the handbook on the development of curriculum materials stated that there would be two types of materials – core content and locally relevant content. The core content had to conform to certain non-negotiables: national integration, women's equality and population education, i.e. the imbibing of the small family norm. Predictably, therefore, a number of primers emphasised a 'linear causal relationship, linking all problems from gender discrimination, poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment and environmental degradation to overpopulation' (Saxena 2007: 420). A truckload of primers building a doomsday scenario where the poor were dragging humanity down through their illiteracy and the consequent growth of population was dumped in field offices in one centre. It is no surprise then that young *dalit* girls in a literacy class held themselves responsible for their poverty and low status (Saxena 2007: 427–8).

The locally relevant content however had possibilities contingent on local level conjunctures: this was the

context for the eruption of the famous anti-arrack (alcohol) women's agitation in Nellore, clearly an incidental rather than planned fallout of the TLC, which merits some attention from the point of view of the issues raised in this article.

The anti-arrack agitation was a local women's response to the education programme initiated for them by the state. The political economy of arrack in the state of Andhra Pradesh has been marvellously and insightfully documented by a number of writers and is an important element in understanding the relationship between the literacy classes and the eruption of the anti-arrack agitation. The story of its beginnings is now part of folklore, widely reported in the newspapers and other media, and tells how some drunken men tried to disrupt a women's literacy meeting in the village of Dubbagunta. One story, which is part of the locally relevant content of the primers used in the literacy class, recounts how a villager called Seethamma was unable to reform her drunken husband and committed suicide – this is not a true story but one specially created for the primer by the women's group, Andhra Mahila Sabha. Such suicides were a social reality. This story deeply affected the women of Dubbagunta who got together and started an organised struggle against arrack in the village. A leading part was played by Rosamma, who was in the women's literacy group, but whose husband had died due to cirrhosis of the liver.

The spontaneous struggle quickly spread throughout the district and ultimately the state, using the infrastructure of the literacy programme. TLC volunteers and state government functionaries were in a sense forced to take up the agitation as women who had gathered for the literacy classes in numerous villages demanded support from them in the anti-liquor campaign. The state government was the primary target of the movement for its policies of promoting liquor sales for the revenues it brought in. The Dubbagunta story itself became the basis of another lesson in a post-literacy primer entitled 'When Women Unite'. During the highest phase of the movement, the auction for the arrack contract could not be conducted in many areas; in one district, the auction was postponed 32 times. Finally, the district collector there was transferred and it was widely believed that this was done at the behest of the liquor contractors.

As the anti-liquor campaign spread and the issue hit the public domain – it even became an election issue – the state government, which was the target of the women's ire, came down heavily on the Nellore TLC. The primer containing the Dubbagunta story was withdrawn, and the collector – the administrative head of the district unit of the government – sent out an order stating that the anti-arrack agitation was an anti-government activity which the literacy staff were not to participate in. The agitation itself faced strong repression especially where women were succeeding in stalling the auctioning of contracts. Finally, more underhand methods were used to break the morale of the women. A rumour was floated that the government's subsidised rice for the poor would be stopped in those villages where women were preventing the entry of liquor; a collusion between the liquor barons and state officials threatened to pit food for survival against the free sale of liquor to break the resistance of the women. Nevertheless, for a while the anti-arrack campaign of women did succeed, as the government was forced to ban the production and sale of arrack in Andhra Pradesh.

The ban was partially lifted in 1996 and at the same time under a new initiative entitled 'taking the government to the people', women's credit and thrift societies – the famous self-help groups (SHGs) – were started at the village level. At this time, in India microcredit and SHGs were seen as the sole means of empowerment for women, the magic wand by which poor women could be delivered from their economic distress – and they would ask no questions of the state. Adult women's education, which was the focus of the TLC, is a vanishing agenda; funding has shifted to the adolescent girl who is regarded as a better target for fertility awareness. This has led to anger and a sense of betrayal among some adult women who are quickly lapsing into non-literate status, as they have no continuing reading practice (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 9).

#### 4 Self-help groups (SHGs)

According to an evaluation of the SHG schemes by Nirantar, a feminist educational organisation (Sharma *et al.* 2007), the SHG model of microcredit represents a heady mix of possibilities: empowerment of women, space for social and political participation, immediate and tangible increase in credit for the poor (avoiding the humiliations of going to the moneylender who was

until recently the only means of accessing credit for the poor), and the inclusion of the poor in self-initiated and productive economic activity.

But precisely since hopes are high, it is necessary that the SHG phenomenon is understood and analysed: what is actually happening as a consequence of the formation and proliferation of SHGs? It is particularly necessary to ask this question, since 90 per cent of the SHGs are comprised solely of women, and the claim is that SHGs have the potential to fundamentally transform women's lives. The Nirantar report, based on a study of two states, Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat, and with close interaction of a number of NGOs working in the field, argues that while access to equitable credit is a person's right, and delivering it to those who need it is a desirable achievement, it cannot be the only criteria by which to measure the impact of SHGs on women's lives. The Nirantar report interestingly uses the lens of education – defined broadly as the 'learning processes including literacy, access to information, processes of critical reflection that enable the learners to make linkages between women's lived realities and the larger structures and ideologies that they are located in' (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 5). Using this lens, and placing women at the centre, the Nirantar study evaluates the claims and espoused goals of the SHGs: empowerment and poverty alleviation.

Further, the Nirantar study examines the consequent changes in the lives of women, defining empowerment as entailing the ability to define the change for themselves, negotiate change, understand and challenge injustice and inequity, and act towards the achievement of strategic goals that address issues of women's status/position. Empowerment was seen as a process in which power was challenged, it connoted collective action, the challenging of ideologies and material realities that were pervasive and deeply entrenched, and given the workings of patriarchy, also challenged internalised norms. Empowerment was not merely about individual choices but must address structural factors that perpetuate inequalities, and finally, empowerment could not be fragmented into 'social' empowerment and 'economic' empowerment since the material and non-material lives of women were linked (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 11–12).

Using these indices of empowerment, the study found that participation in SHGs has improved credit access

to meet crisis consumption needs, particularly those related to education and health; there is reduced though continued dependence on moneylenders, and group leaders at least have greater opportunities for mobility and a legitimate space in the public realm. However, this did not lead to increased control over resources in the family; only a marginal increase in income at best. In the mean, issues of injustice and violence in the lives of women did not get taken up and on the occasions that they were, it was outside the formal space of the SHG which was dominated by a narrowly defined financial agenda.

The study also found that certain sections of the population such as *Dalits*, tribals/*adivasis* and Muslims were excluded from participation in the SHGs, as they were unable to adhere to the need to save regularly, a norm of the SHGs, due to their economically fragile location in the social and material hierarchy. The interest rates are high and kick in immediately and often women have no access to their own credit as there are bureaucratic and banking hurdles.

The Nirantar report is corroborated by a recent study of SHGs in Tamil Nadu by K. Kalpana (Kalpana 2008: 8). She argues that the institutions of the state and the banking system create hurdles in accessing loans and are also discriminatory towards SHGs with primarily *Dalit* membership. Women are often faced with a 'Hobson's choice' as they are made responsible for the default payments of male members of the household; if they are unable to make their male kin pay off loans they are expelled from membership of the SHG. The prevalence of such bank-induced dropouts from the SHGs means that the access to credit is not based on women's needs but contingent on the credit worthiness of their entire affinal families including fathers- and brothers-in-law (Kalpana 2008: 14–18). Thus, the banks manipulate the SHGs and other community level social networks to decide who can and who cannot be a member of an SHG. Kalpana also shows that corruption and political compulsions of the state affect access to the loans and contribute to conflict which damages group solidarity within the SHG. *Dalit* women are more disadvantaged as pressure from the banks is translated within the SHG into pressure on them from other members. Vulnerable women faced by unexpected medical expenses or other emergencies leading to difficulties of repayment are harassed and fined for delayed payments (Kalpana 2008: 20).

Significantly, the Nirantar study argues that the SHG discourses are creating new norms for the 'good woman' in a neoliberal framework: one who saves and repays regularly, puts pressure on other group members to do so similarly – indeed this is an important reason for banks preferring to have women's SHGs as clients – and is committed to the welfare of the family. The evidence that men are happy with women's involvement with the SHGs is in keeping with the reality that this engagement in no way challenges unequal power relations within the family. An official of the SHG scheme 'Swashakti', for example, stated that including indicators of the better status of women would distort the whole programme: 'If we start teaching those things then our whole society will collapse and we will have no values and culture left. Whatever we do it should not destroy our family system' (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 102). Indeed it is 'family values' that make women such desirable people to bank upon: 'women can be located easily ... they cannot run away, leaving their homes; they can be persuaded to repay more easily as they feel shame more quickly and consider non-repayment a matter of family honour', said another official promoting microcredit (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 95).

This overwhelming focus on the family undermines the idea of a woman as an entity, with rights, interests and needs, which the women's movement has long been struggling for, and therefore counters its ideological premises. The SHGs thus doubly reinforce women's position within the family, making them bear the burden of the debts of family members, and ensuring that family relations remain what they have traditionally been, and therefore do not destabilise the family in any way: both work to the advantage of existing structures of power.

The policymakers of the SHG schemes have confined the notion of empowerment to 'economic' gains, and even within the economics, they have excluded questions of increased entitlements and rights over public resources. There is a narrow and distorted notion of poverty alleviation which most notably places the onus of poverty alleviation on poor women themselves. Reducing the notion of empowerment in this way also meets the objectives of developmental specialists with an instrumental approach to it, such as the Commissioner for Rural Development who stated that women's participation in SHGs 'enables us to achieve the goals of development quickly as messages conveyed through the SHGs are more effective, and

they learn to value things like child education and family planning' (Sharma *et al.* 2007: 96).

To sum up, given the narrow thrust of the SHGs, one woman concluded, 'it is a dilemma in my mind how much social action is compatible with micro-finance ... we have no time or structure to address social issues'. Instead, SHGs are replicating the asymmetrical power relations in society, and are instrumental in making it possible for private sector global banks to 'leverage the rural economy', as they do not need their own financial infrastructure to enter the economy. This is making possible the entry of international banks like ICICI and ABN Amro into rural credit markets without too much effort. In addition, block officials try to politically manage the SHGs and circumscribe the capacity of members to directly challenge both state and household patriarchies. There are thus no inherent qualities in SHGs which empower women clients (Kalpana 2008: 34–8).

## 5 Conclusion

If we return to the issues that were raised at the beginning of this article, issues that have been central to the women's movement, it is clear that there is a basic contradiction between the way the women's movement thinks about development (looking at the structures which obstruct women's development and the violence that is part of their everyday lives: poor access to resources and low status within the family, in the community, and in state institutions), and the way the state – whether of its own accord or the behest of wider global forces – perceives development.

Beginning with the *sathin* programme (which some women's groups supported and collaborated with as

it raised critical issues that obstructed the development of women such as violence and denial of access to resources), and continuing through the Total Literacy Campaign (with its potential for collective action and a challenge to both household and state-based patriarchies giving women agency), and finally with the singular focus on SHGs as the key to women's empowerment, the state's systematic subversion of the struggles of the women's movement through its instrumental approach is strikingly evident.

Neoliberal agendas do not require an end to patriarchies, only their management: global and domestic economic forces and their shared ideologies have reduced the idea of women's development/empowerment to a limited financial venture in which the structures of caste, class and patriarchy continue to be reproduced in all essentials. In fact, the hype around microfinance and women's empowerment is providing an entry point for the neoliberal agenda of capturing rural credit markets by riding on the backs of poor disempowered women, all in the name of women's development and women's empowerment. It is time to stop pretending and to return to the central issues of the women's movement: struggling against the violence of patriarchy, its links with caste and class, and the unequal access of women to the power wielded by the state. It is necessary to first deal with the depoliticisation of the people through changes in the vocabulary adopted by policymakers, both at the international and the domestic levels, which have obfuscated the issues feminists have placed before us: the mantra of empowerment will not serve the purpose of a feminist revisioning of the world.

## Note

- \* I have drawn from three sources for the writing of this article: my own participation in an evaluation team on the Women's Development Programme (WDP), Rajasthan, during which I met a number of *sathins* and other officials of the

WDP and the state bureaucracy, and a paper that I wrote thereafter, 'The Rhetoric and Substance of Empowerment', published in John *et al.* (2006); and the experiences and published work of Sadhna Saxena and K. Kalpana listed below, and Sharma *et al.* (2007).

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Women's Voices, Work and Bodily Integrity in Pre-Conflict, Conflict and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Processes in Sierra Leone

Hussainatu J. Abdullah, Aisha F. Ibrahim and Jamesina King

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**Abstract** This article focuses on the historical trajectories of women's empowerment in Sierra Leone, taking three entry-points as a means of exploring the dynamics of change over the pre-conflict, conflict and post-conflict periods: voice and political participation; work and economic participation; and bodily integrity. Looking at pathways of empowerment in pre-conflict Sierra Leone, at experiences of women during the time of conflict over the course of a long and brutal civil war from 1991–2002, and at post-conflict possibilities, the article highlights some of the changes that have taken place in women's lives and the avenues that are opening up in Sierra Leone in a time of peace. It suggests that understanding women's pathways of empowerment in Sierra Leone calls for closer attention to be paid to the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, and to the significance of context in shaping constraints and opportunities.

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## 1 Introduction

'In the very break down of morals, traditions, customs and community, war also opens up and creates new beginnings.' (Turshen 1998: 20)

This article reflects on changes in Sierra Leonean women's lives before, during and in the aftermath of a brutal and protracted civil war endured over the years 1991–2002. The onset of the civil war and its devastating effects on the economy and society brought about dramatic changes in Sierra Leonean women's everyday lives. Yet it also opened up spaces for women's voices. The expansion of educational opportunities gave rise to a crop of highly articulate and educated women, willing to challenge the state and demand a restructuring of gender relations to ensure equality. Women's independent organising became a new pathway of women's empowerment in wartime Sierra Leone, and has opened new avenues for women to articulate their demands for equal rights and social justice in a postwar situation. Sierra Leonean women started demanding legal reforms to promote and protect their rights, equal and fair representation in politics, and access to economic

resources to strengthen their financial positions in society, among others.

This article explores trajectories of change in Sierra Leone through three entry-points – voice and political participation, work and economic participation, and bodily integrity – and focuses not only on the challenges brought on by the war, but also the opportunities created by it. It examines how women have or have not used these openings to transform their existence and status in society. In doing so, we suggest that understanding women's pathways of empowerment in Sierra Leone calls for closer attention to be paid to the dynamics of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, and to the significance of context in shaping constraints and opportunities.

## 2 Voice: women, politics and empowerment

### 2.1 *Women emerging as leaders in the pre-conflict era*

In a part of the world marked by the low numbers of women in political office, Sierra Leonean women have a distinguished history of participation in politics, as chiefs, paramount chiefs, mayors, cabinet ministers and members



of parliament. Sierra Leonean women's participation in politics has, however, been based on individual recognition (such as educational qualification and/or political party affiliation) rather than women's independent organising using their organisational base as a platform for political engagement. As a result, access to political office has been based on tokenism and the benevolence of male leaders.

The dominance of personal achievement as the route to female participation in politics does not mean that women have not tried to use their organisations as a platform for political activism. Mrs Constance Cummings-John, a member of the anti-colonial West African Youth League (WAYL), and leader of the Women's Movement, the first women's group to campaign for women's inclusion in politics and public life, actively participated in the national strike of 1955. Although the activities of the organisation declined after the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), the party of independence, lost the 1967 general election and Mrs Cummings-John was subsequently exiled to England, it has been observed that the association's 'role in mobilising women at the grassroots level for economic reasons was a significant development that inspired subsequent women's associations and promoted a high level of political consciousness among women' (Steady 2006: 64).

These promising beginnings for women's political participation at the birth of the new independent nation of Sierra Leone were to falter with the imposition of a one-party state by the All People's Congress Party (APC) in 1978 and, with it, an end to women's embryonic independent political activism and mobilisation. As a result, women's voices and their participation in the public-political arena became extremely marginal. Women in the public domain either had to kowtow to the state's political line or become apolitical, thereby limiting their ability to organise and challenge existing discriminatory policies and practices in society. When women became 'political', they were mainly cheerleaders and foot soldiers of the APC.

## **2.2 Women's voice in the conflict era**

With the onset of the civil war in 1991, and the military coup of 1992, women's activism turned to efforts to bring about peace, and a transition to democratic governance. Women's token representation continued during the Strasser

military regime of 1991–6, with only one female member of cabinet. But outside the formal political arena women became actively engaged in the peace process in 1994, as part of the preparatory effort towards the Fourth World Conference on Women (the Beijing conference), held in 1995.

Despite their marginalisation from the public decision-making process, Sierra Leonean women – like their counterparts in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Somalia and Rwanda – became the torchbearers of peace. In 1994, the Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) proposed the creation of a network for women to meet regularly and share information on issues of common concern. This initiative led to the creation of the Sierra Leone Women's Forum as the umbrella organisation of over 50 women's groups. Although the Forum's objective was networking for the Beijing conference, due to the devastating effects of the civil war on the economy and society and especially on women, they decided to organise in support of the peace process.

The Sierra Leonean Women's Movement for Peace (SLWMP) and Women Organised for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN), two Forum members, spearheaded women's political organising for peace and democratisation. They organised demonstrations, campaigns, peace matches, debates and prayer rallies and mobilised and built cross-class alliance among women. Women's influence was felt in both National Consultative Conferences in 1995 and 1996. To ensure that conference delegates and the general public maintained their stance on the democratisation project, the Women's Forum embarked on sensitisation campaigns: organising public rallies and press conferences, issuing communiqués and organising meetings to reinforce public opinion in support of the transition programme. In one of their communiqués, the women demanded to be 50 per cent of any peace delegation and demanded involvement in decision-making at all levels. Yet there was no female participant at the Abidjan Peace Accord meeting. In the subsequent elections, women's political representation remained low: women won only five out of the 80 contested parliamentary seats, two women were appointed ministers out of a cabinet of 25, and two were assigned deputy ministerial positions out of 20 deputy ministers.

The Abidjan Peace Accord notwithstanding, the civil crisis continued and on 25 May 1997, the Armed Forces Ruling Council in alliance with the Revolutionary United Forces (RUF), the rebel grouping overthrew the elected government. Once again, women took an active part in the pro-democracy campaigns. However, they could not organise as a group due to the repression and brutality of the coupists. Consequently, they engaged in covert activities as undercover agents infiltrating the junta, exposing their activities in arms deals, diamond smuggling and naming its international partners (Solomon 2005a).

### **2.3 Marginalised again: the post-conflict era**

The war was officially declared over in January 2002 and the first post-conflict election took place in May 2002. Despite their pro-democracy and peace activism during the conflict phase, women were once again marginalised in the formal peace process and in post-conflict public political space. When the Government of Sierra Leone and the RUF rebels signed the Lomé Peace Accord in July 1999, there were only two female members of the delegation – one from each side of the conflict. Furthermore, the Accord had only one reference to women within the body of the text:

Given that women have been particularly victimised during the war, special attention shall be accorded to their needs and potentials in formulating and implementing national rehabilitation, reconstruction and development programmes, to enable them [to] play a central role in the moral, social and physical reconstruction of Sierra Leone. (cited in Eno 2000: 74)

From the above, it can be argued that Sierra Leonean women's activism was not given due recognition either by the state or the international community as they were not recognised as actors and agents of change and peace. Rather, they were seen as victims who should be protected and taken care of.

Women's activism continued as different women's groups mobilised to get more women and women's issues on to the political agenda. The most prominent organisation in this phase of women's political activism was the 50/50 group. Founded in 2001, with the objective of having equal representation of women and men at every level of

decision-making structures, the group's activities included recruiting, training and supporting women seeking elected office in order to remove obstacles hindering their political participation. The 50/50 group's frontal engagement with the patriarchal political system resulted in an increase in women's political representation in the 2002 general election and in elective and political appointments. There was one female presidential candidate and two women presidential running mates. Overall women represented 14.5 per cent of parliamentarians, representing over 100 per cent increase from the 1997 figure of 7.1 per cent. Women constituted 19.3 per cent of ministerial and deputy ministerial appointees. This figure is also more than a 100 per cent increase from 8.8 per cent in 1997. In the 2004 local government elections, 11.8 per cent of elected local government councillors and 5.2 and 10.5 per cent of local government chairs and deputy chairs respectively were women. Sixteen women were elected to parliament in 2007 and in the 2008 local government elections, the number of female councillors increased from 13 per cent to 18.9 per cent. While there is no female chair of a local council, the number of deputies increased from 10.5 to 15.7 per cent. And the new phenomenon of female independent candidates also emerged in Sierra Leone's political landscape. Of the 1,380 contestants for councillorship in the 2008–13 local election cycle, 13.9 per cent were female independent candidates.<sup>1</sup>

Women's intervention in the public–political space during the crisis changed the nature, course and discourse on the peace process and Sierra Leonean politics in general. Why then were Sierra Leonean women unable to maintain the momentum and utilise the opportunities created by the conflict to make their mark in post-conflict politics and reconstruction policies? Various explanations have been put forward. For Jusu-Sheriff (2000), a Forum activist, the women's movement was unable to seize the new opportunities created by the conflict because it lacked a clear and strong ideological framework and strategy to confront entrenched patriarchal structures in the society. For Dyfan, another Forum activist, the women's focus was more on ensuring that the democratisation process was not derailed and that the election process was free and fair than on increasing women's participation in politics as leaders and decision-makers (quoted in Steady 2006: 46). Steady's analysis of the process points to other issues:

... the Women's Forum did have an ideological framework in their commitment to democratisation, peace, development and the advancement of women. What they lacked was a strategic plan of action to implement their vision and ideological position. Problems of resource constraints also contributed to derailing prompt and effective action toward a realistic and meaningful process of democratisation. (2006: 58)

In addition to the views outlined above on the failure of the Sierra Leonean women's movement to transform the country's political landscape, we believe that the historical antecedent of the movement affected its engagement with the political process and its outcomes. The failure to develop women's independent political voice after Mrs Cummings-John's exile, the APC's authoritarian rule and the creation of the Women's Congress as the legitimate political voice of women affected the movement's participation and response to the new political openings. Given the above, can we say that Sierra Leonean women are empowered? It can be argued that despite the Forum's massive political mobilisation and sensitisation campaign during the war years, Sierra Leonean women are still not politically empowered. However, there is a groundswell of political activism taking place among elected women officials at the national and local levels and among civil society organisations aimed at sensitising the populace on the need for more elected female officials. For example, elected female politicians and local councillors have established cross-party organisations to promote women and women's issues in parliament and local government structures.<sup>2</sup> Within civil society, a coalition of women's groups created the Women's Solidarity Fund<sup>3</sup> in 2008 to support female local council contestants. The Fund focused primarily on funding and promoting female independent candidates.

### 3 Work and access to resources

Even though their contributions have often been undervalued and taken for granted, Sierra Leonean women have always been an integral part of the country's workforce and economic development. There have been an impressive number of women in influential positions ranging from paramount chiefs, political activists, high court judges, educators,

entrepreneurs, businesswomen and cabinet ministers to presidential candidates. Women are also well represented in the civil service, the legal profession, police force, military, teaching and nursing and some have held top notch positions such as permanent secretaries, director-generals, chief medical officers and top ranking officers in the army.

However, the presence of women in the public sphere and positions of authority has not necessarily closed the gender gap. Even though many Sierra Leonean women have transgressed and continue to transgress masculine/public spaces in terms of work and access to resources, they are still the minority and, in some instances, are operating from a framework designed by male leaders/politicians who act as their patrons. The majority of Sierra Leonean women are uneducated, lack or have limited access to capital, education, land, etc. and live under discriminatory customary laws that assign them second-class citizenship. While the civil war made women's lives more difficult in many ways, it also created spaces for women to agitate for change in relation to their access to resources – whether education, jobs or other economic opportunities.

#### 3.1 Women in the labour force

As is the case the world over, most women in Sierra Leone work double shifts in the formal or 'informal' economy and as home managers, taking care of the daily business of running a family. Unfortunately, their productive and reproductive labour in the domestic sphere never figures in the economic index. According to the *Sierra Leone Human Development Report* (UNDP 2007), there were more women (13 per cent) in the labour force than men, but they worked mainly in the informal sector, in activities such as gara making (tie-dyeing), soap making, basket making, oil extraction, hairdressing, childcare and petty trading, none of which yield high incomes.

Women in Sierra Leone have a long history of engaging in trade whether at the local or sub-regional level probably because trade has always been the one activity that provides them with immediate employment/subsistence. Some of these traders own shops in which they sell foodstuffs or imported clothing and others sell in the marketplaces or from their homes to friends and relatives. Because most of these women engage in petty trading and do not own big

business ventures, they have always found it difficult to secure credit from financial institutions, whose demands they often cannot meet. The two main ways that they had traditionally been able to access capital, through cooperatives and *osusu* (rotating credit) clubs, have been and continue to be the most popular forum for mobilising capital. Postwar unemployment and postwar reconstruction strategies such as the availability of microcredit have led to an upsurge in petty trading. Unfortunately, many of these women barely break even and whatever profit they make goes toward feeding and taking care of the immediate needs of their households which often does not include comprehensive healthcare and meeting most of the educational needs of their children. It can be argued that these economic hardships have led to many anti-social behaviours such as enlistment in the rebel movement and engaging in sugar-daddyism, that is, taking older male lovers for economic support.

### 3.2 Economic opportunities during and after the conflict

During the war, rebel camps became an opportunity and alternative to a better life for many young women. As Binta Mansaray explains: 'Looting was also a reason why some women stayed in the movement: in a society that had so deprived them, they knew that they would never get the opportunity to legally earn a fraction of their gain from raiding and looting villages' (2000: 146). In effect, war zones become 'a space in which social and economic opportunities unavailable in "safe" areas (such as refugee camps) could be found' (Utas 2005: 421). Solomon (2005b) documents the benefits and risks involved in trading in rebel zones during conflict. As the effects of the UN-imposed sanction of 8 October 1997, banning the sale of arms, petroleum and petroleum products impacted on the society, a thriving black market sector emerged that was extremely profitable to female traders. According to her narrative, in spite of the risks such as road accidents sometimes resulting in deaths, ambush and dispossession, market women ventured into the rebel zone to sell the goods they had smuggled across the border from Guinea.

... they were paid either in cash (Leones or Dollars) or in kind, including jewellery, gold or diamonds. Back in Freetown, market women either sold their diamonds to Lebanese dealers or smuggled the gems across the border to Guinea where they fetched higher

prices enabling them to buy more food stuffs... Some died in gruesome road accidents on their way to the provinces never making it to their destinations. Others were ambushed on their way back to Freetown by the same rebels they had earlier traded with. Sometimes their 'customers' would send their 'boys' after they had concluded their transactions, to retrieve the money and/or valuables the women had earlier received as payments (Solomon 2005a: 10).

After the war, there was a large increase in sex work fuelled mainly by the presence of a large contingent of UN and ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group) peacekeepers and the large numbers of internally displaced people and orphans in the country. Many of these sex workers head households and take care of extended family members with their earnings. Even though many female ex-combatants are said to be engaged in sex work, the majority have been trained as hairdressers and seamstresses as part of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) programme. The aim of the rehabilitation part of the programme was to make them self-employed. However, even as these trainings help to create employment, they also hinder women's advancement in the formal sector. With limited skills and no formal education, it will be impossible for these women to occupy upper and middle-management positions, have equal access or close the gender gap.

Women's access to productive resources remains precarious, despite high levels of female participation in agricultural activities. Even in areas such as farming, where women continue to outnumber men, they have limited or no access to land. Moreover, when they do have access to land they are denied credit by financial institutions because of reasons that are often gendered. According to the country's National Policy on the Advancement of Women, '60–80 per cent of women earn their living through agricultural activities and are engaged in 90 per cent of food production' but yet 'they have less access to technical and financial inputs than their male counterparts' (Government of Sierra Leone 1998: 7).

Now more than ever, many Sierra Leonean women are developing different survival

strategies and reconstruction plans to help them deal with the harsh realities of a postwar society. Microcredit revolving loan schemes, the main programme in the government's, development agencies' and local non-governmental organisations' (NGOs') economic reconstruction project, is seen as the vehicle to help women rebuild their lives, create a source of livelihood, and gain financial independence and ultimately economic empowerment. Using the effects of microcredit on the lives of market women in Sierra Leone, Solomon argues that not only did microcredit create employment opportunities for women, increased self-sufficiency and improved the standard of living in postwar Sierra Leone, but also increased women's political participation in local organisations and awakened their sense of involvement in the economic reconstruction of the society (Solomon 2005a: 13). She notes further that while these were important changes, it did not alter existing gender relations in the society.

#### **4 Bodily integrity**

In pre-war Sierra Leone, issues such as rape, sexual violence and domestic violence were hardly discussed or addressed. Though now curtailed, practices such as early and forced marriages whereby very young girls are given in marriage to men old enough to be their grandfathers still persist, remain acceptable and are hardly challenged. As a result, immature girls face early sexual activity and are exposed to risks and complications arising out of early pregnancy and childbirth. The situation of women is further worsened by an inadequate, unaffordable and inaccessible healthcare system in the country, making Sierra Leone a country with one of the highest maternal and infant mortality rates.<sup>4</sup>

##### **4.1 Sexual violence in the pre-conflict period**

Discussing and reporting rape and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls has always been an uphill task. In pre-war Sierra Leone, women and girls had much more difficulty reporting rape and other sexual violence they experienced because, for one, they were made to believe that they were responsible for the acts perpetrated against them. Perpetrators were hardly prosecuted or made accountable for sexual crimes committed against women and a culture of silence and impunity pervaded the society. In many cases, the discovery of sexual violence

committed against a girl or a woman was usually addressed not by the victim, but by family members who felt that the family honour had been violated. Moreover, the virginal status of the girl or woman greatly influenced the reaction of the family. Where the sexual abuse of a virgin girl or woman was discovered, the family or community had various means of dealing with the situation. Often the focus was on reclaiming the dignity of the family. In the rural areas, most sexual violations were addressed without recourse to the courts, but dealt with by chiefs, community elders and religious leaders. Among most ethnic groups the perpetrators are required to pay an amount as a fine and in cases where the woman is married such fines are known as woman damage. In a few ethnic groups, physical punishment may be inflicted on the perpetrator and in other ethnic groups the perpetrator may be forced to marry the victim leading to a further violation of the rights of the victim.

The phrase 'domestic violence' was rarely used before the conflict, and violence within the home or in a relationship was never considered to be domestic violence. Such behaviour was considered almost normative and among certain ethnic groups physical chastisement of wives was a right husbands had and were free to exercise. The culture of silence, in relation to domestic violence, was so prevalent that even educated women who were victims of domestic violence rarely reported such crimes. Even though acts of domestic violence could be prosecuted within the legal framework under the crime of assault, wounding, manslaughter or murder, in both rural and urban areas, sexual violence cases, including rape, were hardly ever taken to court. Police were often reluctant to investigate because they believe that they were personal, belonged to the domestic realm and ought to be addressed at home or within the family structure. The victim's fear of ostracism, stigma and shame often prevented them from testifying in public. Archaic laws and the gender insensitivity and unreasonable bureaucratic delays of the justice system were a further obstacle. Impunities escalated and became manifest during the war.

##### **4.2 Violations in a time of war**

The violations that women and girls experienced during the war were characterised by the most extraordinary inexplicable acts of violence, leaving many women permanently scarred. The

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report notes that 'women and girls were the deliberate targets of sexual violence and rape by all the armed groups during the conflict' (Government of Sierra Leone 2004: 167, 169). Women and girls were tortured as various objects such as firewood, sticks, and guns were inserted into their private parts. Some women were forced to have sex with other male members of their families such as their sons and wards. There were also a few reports of disembowelment of pregnant women and torture and killing of babies in their mother's presence. Some women and girls had their arms and limbs amputated. Abducted women and girls experienced sexual slavery and forced marriage. An estimated 58 per cent of women suffering sexual violence were repeatedly violated by multiple perpetrators. Furthermore, to instil fear and deter abductees from escaping, the different warring factions often tattooed or marked their victims with knives, blades and other sharp instruments on various parts of their bodies. The abuse of women was indeed a weapon of war and a strategy designed to destroy the norms and values of the society.

The violations committed against women and girls continue to have a negative impact on their lives in postwar Sierra Leone. Because of societal sanctions against abortions and lack of access to proper healthcare, a lot of women had to carry unwanted pregnancies and have become single mothers in a postwar society in which life can be unbearably difficult. Psychosocially, many women suffer in silence, carry the shame and stigma of their rape and abduction experience and are reluctant to discuss these experiences or seek help. Some women suffer permanent or irreparable injury as there has been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In effect, widowhood, ostracism and forced pregnancies have led to an increase in female-headed households where families live in very poor conditions. However, postwar reconstruction efforts, through the creation of gender-sensitive programmes, have begun to address many of these problems.

Although the terms of reference of the TRC made no reference to women, in undertaking its task, the TRC invited and received submissions from NGOs, women's groups and other activists on the issue of violence against women during the war. It also invited and recorded testimonies from victims

of sexual and other abuses. It particularly dealt with the status of women before the conflict in order to ascertain links with such abuses of women before, during and after the conflict. The TRC was gender sensitive and in its processes ensured that gender issues were taken into account. Reports of the violence women faced during the conflict led to the proliferation of agencies and NGOs operating in Sierra Leone. The efforts and successes of these organisations are debatable because there are a large number of victims who claim that they have not benefited from such programmes. During the special hearings for women at the TRC most victims of sexual violence complained that they had not received any medical assistance and that they continue to experience health problems related to the sexual abuse they encountered during the war.

#### **4.3 Current challenges**

Violence against women continues to prevail in the society as a result of the structural inequalities women face, absence of law reform to address such violations and the continued application of discriminatory laws. One important change as a result of the war is the increased and sustained activism of women advocating for peace democracy and good governance. In their campaigns, women have also skilfully advocated for the respect and protection of women's rights, the prosecution of offenders and law reform to restore the dignity of women. We now have a lot of women's groups advocating for women's rights at all levels and the momentum is building.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs has been involved in a lot of initiatives towards the protection and promotion of the rights of women. Other manifestations of an increased political will to address women's rights issues are the setting up of the Family Support Unit by the Sierra Leone Police Force to address sexual violence and domestic violence. There has also been a marked increase in the reporting, investigation and prosecution of sexual and domestic violence. The media regularly reports incidences of sexual violence, particularly against minors, and domestic violence even though reports about prosecution or conviction of these offences are almost non-existent.

Even though the need to address sexual and domestic violence is part of the wider postwar

discourse on women's empowerment, there are challenges towards the elimination of such violence. For one, the policies developed by the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs on the Advancement of Women and Gender Mainstreaming are hardly implemented. These policies recognise the historical discrimination against women and the need to ensure that the rights of women are secured and promoted in all spheres of society. The establishment of the Family Support Unit of the police is recognition of the need for the enforcement of the laws against sexual and domestic violence, but their work is hampered by lack of personnel, training and other support.

Through the collaborative efforts of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and civil society groups, laws that were drafted to cover domestic violence, minimum age of marriage (18 years), customary marriage laws, divorce registration and inheritance laws, and marriage rights in general were adopted by Parliament in June 2007. These Bills<sup>3</sup> commonly known as the 'Gender Bills' seek to implement the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that advocates for the removal of discriminatory laws and to ensure that the rights of women are secured and enforced. These Bills are the outcome of nationwide consultation. With a comprehensive legal framework in place, women will begin to address the structural inequality, discrimination and abuse they face on an everyday basis.

## 5 Conclusions

The Sierra Leonean women's movement, as an organised force, was able to confront the

challenges brought on by the civil war, by increasing their voices and participation in the political space, and their bargaining power in the household as well as changing the discourse on bodily integrity during the conflict phase. However, it was not able to fully use the opportunities created by the war to advance a women's agenda for gender equality and empowerment in the immediate post-conflict reconstruction process. This is in spite of the fact that postwar Sierra Leone has seen an increase in the number of local and international NGOs headed by women and with a focus on empowering women. As they advocate for voice, participation, bodily integrity and help to provide access to work, education, land, the legal system, healthcare, credit, etc., these women and their organisations have not only been instrumental in changing the lives of many women but also in creating the space for other Sierra Leonean women to advocate for change.

The war and its effects on the society resulted not only in the emergence of a pathway for women's empowerment, but the adoption of the Gender Bills, the submission of Sierra Leone's country reports to the CEDAW committee and the establishment of the family support unit within the police force, and serve as pointers towards Sierra Leonean women's journey of empowerment. Furthermore, the establishment and the effective functioning of the Human Rights Commission, it is hoped, will create more awareness on women's rights and help to protect and advance those rights and address issues of sexual and domestic violence. Even though nationwide sensitisation and awareness-raising campaigns about the rights of women remain a great challenge, work towards the restoration of the dignity and integrity of women is in full force.

## Notes

- 1 Women stood as independent candidates after they were sidelined in the nomination process by their parties.
- 2 Network of female parliamentarians and ministers revived in 2008 and network of female councillors established in 2009.
- 3 Campaign for Good Governance, 50/50, Search for Common Ground and Gender Empowerment Movement.
- 4 1,800 per 10,000 live births.
- 5 Domestic Violence Act, Customary Marriage Act and the Succession Act.

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Introduction: Negotiating Empowerment

Andrea Cornwall and Jenny Edwards\*

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**Abstract** This introductory article draws out some of the dimensions and dilemmas around women's empowerment that are highlighted in the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*: the choices, the negotiations, the narratives and above all, the context of women's lived experience. In doing so, we show that empowerment is a complex process that requires more than the quick and easy solutions often offered by development agencies. Much of the significant change happening in women's lives takes place outside of the range of these conventional interventions. In conclusion, we suggest that for development agencies to really support women's empowerment requires greater engagement with changing structures rather than accommodating women within the inequitable existing order, and a much deeper understanding of what makes change happen in their lives.

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## 1 Introduction

Women's empowerment is heralded in today's development circles as a means that can produce extraordinary ends. Women are vaunted as a 'weapon against poverty' (DFID 2006: 1), their empowerment extolled as the solution to a host of entrenched social and economic problems. In response to this maelstrom of policy excitement, this issue of the *IDS Bulletin* is devoted to exploring what empowerment means in the everyday lives of women in different situations and circumstances. It draws on the work of an international network of researchers, the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (RPC, hereafter 'Pathways').<sup>1</sup> Its aim is to bring fresh empirical and conceptual insights to an audience of development academics and policy actors, for whom 'women's empowerment' may be a familiar mantra, but one rarely accompanied by a consideration of the complexities of change or the lived realities of women's lives.<sup>2</sup>

The predominant image evoked by international development agencies when they talk of empowerment is of women gaining the (material) means to empower themselves as individuals, and putting this to the service of their families and communities. This tends to neglect what

women are doing for and by themselves to bring about change in their own and other women's lives. The Pathways programme set out to look for these 'hidden' pathways, as well as at the better-known routes that those concerned with women's empowerment were promoting. Our interest is not just in individuals' pathways of change, nor only in what women are doing to change their own personal circumstances. Our exploration of pathways of positive change extends to collective action and institutionalised mechanisms that are aimed at changing structural relations as well as individual circumstances. We look beyond deliberate or planned intervention to try to gain a better understanding of what is happening in women's lives as a result of cultural, economic and other changes, such as the availability of new technologies such as mobile phones and satellite television. And as well as focusing on women's current opportunities and constraints, our work situates empowerment as a process in time, exploring change and continuities across generations.

Our focus in the first part of this *IDS Bulletin* is on mechanisms promoted by development agencies to enhance women's empowerment: electoral quotas, education, economic empowerment initiatives, legislative change and

non-governmental public action. Contributors evaluate the extent to which these tools have had the kinds of effects that were intended or might be expected to produce. They reflect on what else might be needed to render them more effective in terms of their potential to transform. Our analysis draws attention to elements of empowerment initiatives that are often forgotten in the rush of easy promises: the sheer uphill struggle that is required to get hard-won policies and laws implemented.

The second section focuses on strategies for advocacy and mobilising used by women's organisations and movements. Here the focus is on challenges and contradictions, as well as stories of success and struggle. What emerges are powerful tales of the dedication and ingenuity of those who persist against all odds, the tactics that are resorted to in fields of power in which there may be little overt room for manoeuvre, the rallying points, the alliances, the compromises and the disappointments.

Our final section seeks to restore some of the complex richness of women's experience stripped away in the current reductionist logics. In doing so, we highlight a point that has been reinforced time and again by Pathways researchers: that empowerment is a journey, rather than a product. It is a journey that involves constant negotiation and compromise, with uncertain outcomes. Our research reveals pathways of empowerment that lie beyond the conventional gaze of development agencies. These reveal other dimensions of empowerment in aspects of women's lives often obscured by the materialism of development: the solace of belief and the sociality of religious practice, the pleasures of leisure, and the centrality to women's lives of affective and supportive relationships with others.

In this introduction, we seek to draw out some of the dimensions and dilemmas of women's empowerment, and to explore their implications. We do so via a series of keywords that capture – although they do not exhaust – the themes emerging from the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*.

### Context

It is a well-accepted feminist dictum that women cannot be empowered by others: 'real' empowerment is something that women can only

do for themselves (Rowlands 1997). Yet, while there is general acceptance of this axiom, there is less attention paid – to paraphrase Marx – to the fact that women's pathways of empowerment are pursued under conditions that are not of their own choosing. Development agencies often evoke images of empowered autonomous subjects, able to choose, make and shape their own directions of travel. In reality, very few of us have the capacity to make independent choices and to follow them through. These 'structures of constraint' referred to by Marx and usefully highlighted by many feminist economists (Folbre 1994; Kabeer 2008) restrict women's ability to choose their own paths. But also the very nature of empowerment is something far more contingent and contextual, and ultimately far less predictable than the quick fit solutions, purveyed by development agencies, allow for.

Context is crucial in making sense of empowerment. Historical shifts in societal and cultural norms and practices, as well as in institutions in politics and the economy, current and previous political conjunctures, the density of donor engagement and the nature of the state, the broader landscape of organisations and social movements, and a number of other contextual factors impinge on the possibilities for women's empowerment – facilitating and enabling but also blocking and restricting possibilities. In this *IDS Bulletin* we explore a number of the 'solutions' that have become universalised by development agencies – quota systems to enhance women's political representation, education for girls, legal reforms aimed at securing or enhancing women's rights, support to civil society. These are examined against how they play out within the realities of women's lives in particular political, social and cultural contexts.

Articles by Hussainatu Abdullah, Aisha F. Ibrahim and Jamesina King; Akosua Darkwah; Penny Johnson; and Cecilia Sardenberg all highlight the significance of contextualising efforts to enhance women's empowerment in time as well as place. As Darkwah shows, for older generations of Ghanaian women education did provide a pathway of empowerment; but for younger women, the route map has changed, as have the means of enhancing their prospects in the contemporary labour market. Cecilia Sardenberg considers changes across generations of working class women in a Brazilian low-

income neighbourhood, exploring how shifting expectations shape women's everyday lives and choices. Abdullah *et al.* show how vital history is to understanding women's struggles to gain visibility and voice. Penny Johnson's article poses the question of how we perceive the idea of empowerment in a context where prolonged warlike conditions are 'ordinary' and instability is the norm.

Terezinha Gonçalves' account of the gains made by the domestic workers' movement in Brazil illustrates precisely just how much context matters in understanding their significance, and the scope for achieving them. To understand the story of the domestic workers' movement, she points out, we need to recognise deep-rooted patterns of discrimination and exploitation from the era of slavery. Equally, to make sense of what the movement has achieved, we need to locate their activism in the current political conjuncture. Brazil's left-of-centre Workers' Party government has had a major influence on the gains secured by workers' movements of all kinds, especially the marginalised. To grasp just how significant these gains are, we need to know about the dynamics of difference in this context – gender, race and class – and the distinctive tensions and contradictions their intersection provokes. Gonçalves shows how these play out in all aspects of domestic workers' lives, from the workplace, to the home, to engagement with union, feminist and black movements.

### Choice

Empowerment is not just about enlarging the boundaries of action. It is also about extending the horizons of possibility, of what people imagine themselves being able to be and do. Mainstream empowerment discourses reduce the complexity of this process to a simple equation, in which there is a linear connection between choice, action and outcome (Buvinic and King 2007).

The World Bank has enthusiastically promoted women's empowerment. In one publication, empowerment is defined as 'the process of enhancing an individual's or group's capacity to make purposive choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes' (Alsop *et al.* 2005: 120). The rich empirical material in this *IDS Bulletin* reveals some of the limitations of thinking about empowerment in such a linear way. First of all, outcomes are not always the

direct result of choices. An outcome in terms of a change in the degree to which young women will be sexually harassed in the street calls for more than for those young women to 'choose' that change; and the action that manifests a 'choice' and produces that 'outcome' may be young women covering themselves up completely or not walking down the street on their own. This would hardly fall within most feminists' – or indeed the World Bank's – view of 'empowerment'.

A deliberate action that contravenes a social norm may constitute an act of empowerment. But such acts may or may not have any effect on the acts of others; similarly, they may or may not make any difference in the longer term to the situation either of the actor or of other women. Acts may have entirely unintended outcomes, just as outcomes may be produced by entirely unrelated acts. Actions presumed to lead to empowerment – taking a microcredit loan, for example – may simply sustain women in their existing situation. External interventions aimed at producing empowerment may, similarly, fail to achieve the desired results precisely because there is a failure to understand the social dimensions of constraint, as well as the cultural limits of 'choice' (Kabeer 2008). As Kalpana Wilson (2008) notes, within this there is a reduction of women's exercise of agency to strategies for individual self-improvement, rather than struggles for transformation – that which Cecilia Sardenberg (2009) dubs 'liberal' as opposed to 'liberating' empowerment.

Looking beyond the obvious, at hidden pathways of women's empowerment, becomes crucial if we are to understand change in women's lives. Samia Rahim and Aanmona Priyadarshani's account of what Bangladeshi slum women gain from watching television is a good example of what can be learnt by looking beyond deliberate efforts that are made to 'empower women' to what is happening in women's lives that is bringing about change. What comes to constitute a (potentially empowering) 'choice' is very context-specific. It depends not only on broader social, cultural, economic and political environments, but also on the circumstances of particular women. What is experienced as empowering by one woman is not necessarily going to be so for every woman; empowerment for one can be disempowerment for another. What may be available as a choice to one woman may be out of bounds for others, and it may be a matter of

context whether certain kinds of choices can be constructed as 'empowering' at all.

Narratives of empowerment tend to evoke women taking power, doing what they please, shrugging off customs or constraints, making it for themselves. And yet when we look more closely at women's pathways of empowerment, and at what 'choice' may actually mean in their everyday lives, a rather different picture emerges. In a number of articles in this collection, the kinds of 'choices' that are being made do not feature in the development narrative; we find pathways of empowerment that wend through settings such as a prayer group or an afternoon in front of the television. It is difficult for development agencies to countenance that, for example, the pleasures of leisure can be empowering. Sometimes what women actually want and do are not the paths development organisations hope women would tread. But it is important to recognise and respect women's own perspectives and decisions, even if they may not appear to outsiders to be empowering.

### **Narratives**

How women are portrayed in literature, religion and the media deeply affects how they are perceived and treated. For all the affirmative tone that development agencies take when extolling women's role in uplifting and enriching their communities and societies, these popular representations tell a different story. They include the message that a woman's education is secondary to a man's, that her unmarried state is a crisis, that if she is good she devotes her life to her family, that violence against her is brought on by her own immorality and that her abuse is a weapon of war. Cropping up in a number of articles in this *IDS Bulletin* is the pervasive notion of what a 'good girl' or 'good woman' is and how she is expected to act; anything that kicks against these expectations is frowned upon, if not actively repressed.

International non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development banks and donors play into these narratives to sell themselves to their publics, and secure their legitimacy. Their use of the iconic image of the 'poor, powerless and pregnant' Third World woman (Mohanty 1988; Win 2004) may have given way to the smiling faces of 'empowered' women, but the narrative is still one in which the development agency plays the part of hero. Women's organisations face difficult choices about

how to portray women's issues. In reflections on the dilemmas faced by a Bangladeshi feminist NGO in getting the tone right in advocacy for acid victims, Nazneen and Sultan reflect on the challenges in this context of navigating between representations that play to a sympathy that can be elicited from viewing publics, and the need to show women not as victims but agents.

In a number of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin*, we begin to see the impact of broader societal change and social mobilisation on the way women are beginning to see themselves and engage critically with things they may before have taken for granted. Priyadarshani and Rahim's analysis of women watching television in Dhaka slums, documents conformity with normative ideals of women's position in society. They also reveal a desire among these women for more positive and powerful representations of women. Access to new technologies such as mobile phones and satellite television can bring moral danger – as in the example in Penny Johnson's article of the woman who is killed when doctored images of her are circulated by mobile phone. Yet it can also forge new pathways of empowerment, enabling women to learn and exercise tactics for negotiating power in their lives.

### **Relationships matter**

Mainstream empowerment narratives tend to neglect relationships, focusing on individual women's trajectories of self-improvement or on the bigger picture of society-wide economic change. But women's lived experiences of empowerment cannot be understood adequately by approaches that atomise women, abstracting them from the social and intimate relations that constrain and make possible their empowerment or disempowerment (Kabeer 1998; Cornwall 2007). Naila Kabeer and Lopita Huq's article places relationships at the centre, showing how a social relationship with a women's organisation can prove stronger even than familial bonds. They tell of how a 'failed' NGO – the Bangladeshi women's organisation Saptagram – was revived out of love for a group that had invested so much in building relationships with the women it worked with that they came to see it as a cherished part of their everyday lives. They cite one of these women, Rashida:

*I have learnt how to stand on my own two feet from Saptagram, the value of unity, how to overcome*

*problems, how to mix with people, how to sign my name. And I have learnt about our rights.*

The quote is revealing. Being able to 'stand on my own two feet' is a familiar enough indicator of empowerment, but this is set alongside other gains such as the value of unity, how to mix with people, 'our rights'. It attests to a more relational than individualistic view of autonomy (cf. MacKenzie and Stoljar 2000). Kabeer (1998) makes a vital point that is often forgotten by those who pick up more enthusiastically on her framework than on her analysis, cautioning against extracting women from the relational webs that constitute their social and economic lives.

Cecilia Sardenberg illustrates other relational dimensions that are important to factor into our understanding of empowerment. Writing about women in a low-income neighbourhood in Brazil, she shows how change can take place amidst apparent continuity, when women's perspectives on their own relationships and entitlements change. Sardenberg illustrates how a tradition of matrifocal domestic arrangements and female employment in this context has offered women a degree of power within an otherwise patriarchal culture. What has changed, she suggests, is women's own recognition of their position. In particular, women have come to recognise the limits of ideals of conjugal relationships that were part of their own discourse in this community a decade ago – and women are now freeing themselves from abusive relationships, and making their own decisions about where and whether to work, even if they face opposition from partners. Sardenberg's analysis attests to the significance of consciousness for women's empowerment. Indeed, she suggests, 'there seems to be a new discourse – a feminist discourse – about women's roles and women's rights finding expression among working-class women in Brazil'. She also affirms the centrality of relationships, of the 'power with' that comes from being embedded in kin and community relationships, principally with women, which enable women to gain the power to act. The positivity in these female relationships for younger generations is clearly seen in Dona Nora's pronouncement that her granddaughter 'will be an Olympic champion'.

Relationships are also at the heart of the accounts of organisational and movement strategies that Nazneen and Sultan, and others such as Eyben,

Abdullah *et al.* and Gonçalves tell. A common thread running through these very different contexts and struggles is the significance of the kinds of relationships that can serve advocacy and mobilisation, in particular alliances and coalitions. What emerges is the strategic importance for feminist action of a multilayered constituency of potential allies, located within, as well as outside, government and other agencies for policymaking and implementation.

While a number of the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* reveal pathways of empowerment in which development agencies have played scant if any part, several offer lessons about relationships that development agencies would do well to heed (cf. Eyben 2006). Among them is the need to look beyond the materiality of money to what it does for and to relationships. This point is well made in Kabeer and Huq's poignant tale of the near-demise of a much-loved organisation as a result of donors showering it with money that it could ill absorb. It is also made in Sholkamy's account of civil society organisations in Ain el-Sira, with their limited vision, reach and means. What is evident from many of the articles, is that it is relationships rather than assets that bring about the kinds of changes associated with 'empowerment' – such as growth in self-confidence, capabilities and consciousness, and capacity to act collectively to demand rights and recognition. This seems almost self-evident, but it is a point that is easily missed in the reduction of empowerment to an equation in which certain 'inputs' will yield the desired outcomes in terms of economic growth, better-nourished children or other social or economic goods.

Relationships are, of course, far less visible and far less tangible than the measurable 'results' that donors seek. And yet without investments in creating an enabling environment that can not only support individual women to take up opportunities, but also address structural obstacles to more equitable gender relations, much if not most of what is done to promote women's empowerment stands little chance of making a sustainable difference.

### **Voice**

Whether empowerment is conceptualised as individual journey or as collective struggle, both emphasise women finding and using their voice. There is as little disagreement among

development actors about the need to promote women's political empowerment as there is with the benefits of women's economic empowerment (Eyben *et al.* 2008). Yet quite *which* women are the beneficiaries of empowerment interventions, who they represent and what they voice raises a host of thorny issues (Goetz and Nyamu Musembi 2008).

Much attention has been focused on the domain of formal politics, and on increasing the numbers of women in office. Quota systems are a relatively recent innovation – many dating from the period after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, where the 30 per cent target for female representation in political office was set.<sup>3</sup> Ana Alice Costa's article draws on Latin American experience to reflect on lessons learnt from the contrasting experiences of countries achieving relatively high proportions of women in public office and those where numbers remain very low. Quotas may get more women into political office, where they are implemented effectively – and that remains a huge challenge, as Costa points out. But changing politics calls for more than a few individual women finding a path into political office: as the slogan of the Argentinian political feminist network cited by Costa puts it, 'with a few women in politics, women change; with a lot of women in politics, politics change'.

For feminist and women's movements in many countries, the highly exclusionary, patriarchal arena of formal politics has often been one of the least promising pathways to power. Costa notes how few women have made it to the top on merit, rather than through family connections. Abdullah *et al.* show for Sierra Leone that women seeking political office have faced the obstacles not only of their gender, but also their class and family connections. One of the shifts they note is a widening of political opportunity beyond a clutch of privileged women. Their analysis shows the need to look more closely at the different arenas in which women's voices are elicited and listened to, and to think more critically about the extent to which opportunities to participate and influence in one arena translate into a broader willingness on the part of powerful institutions to listen to women. Their article tells a story, familiar from other contexts, of the role played by women's mobilisation and voice in Sierra Leone's struggle for peace, and women's marginalisation after the war was over. And yet,

as they and other contributors show, there can be a cumulative effect of efforts to gain public and political space, as tactics are honed and networks are strengthened, lending women opportunities for political apprenticeship that they may otherwise be denied.

Development goals and targets have focused more attention on formal politics than on the myriad other spaces that exist for decision-making and influence. Male domination of spaces of decision-making power in the economic arena has come under greater scrutiny in recent years, making an appearance in this year's Davos Meeting as a key issue. Marginalised from formal institutions of politics and the economy, women's organising has not only happened outside these domains, but has often focused on other means of being heard: through movement building to gain public presence and influence public opinion, through engaging the media, and through alliances with other movements and, as Eyben points out, supportive bureaucrats. Nazneen and Sultan make an observation that holds for other settings. In their comparative analysis of three Bangladeshi women's organisations, they note how feminist and women's movements have been as reluctant to engage in party politics as they have been unsuccessful in engaging political parties with their concerns.

Lastly, an assumption is often made that there are more opportunities for women to gain a voice at the 'community' level – through community-based organisations (CBOs), women's groups and so on – and that these organisations are in a position to know and articulate what women need. Hania Sholkamy's account of NGOs and CBOs in a Cairo slum questions the presumption that civil society organisations are closer to the poor, participatory and more responsive than the state. She shows how duplication of effort can render intervention less effective. The programmes that are implemented are unsustainable and are not revised to adapt to changing circumstances. In Penny Johnson's article we see women's exasperation at being given the same information that agencies think they need rather than information on sexuality and their bodies, which is what they want. It seems that in all the fine talk about empowerment, participation has slipped off the agenda: and if women are to have a voice, far more needs to be done to engage them, at all levels, in the decisions that affect their lives.



## Negotiation

Seeing empowerment as a process of negotiation – one that may consist of subtle acts that increase women's room for manoeuvre as well as the overt exercise of agency – opens up the possibility of recognising the 'empowering' elements of acts that might at first sight appear 'disempowering'. Empowerment emerges from these studies as something that is less about clear-cut choices that are transformed into actions and outcomes, but more something that is at once more provisional and dynamic.

This emerges powerfully in Samia Huq's article, which explores the complexities of faith, religion and empowerment in Bangladesh. Huq looks at how women steer their path through the structures of religion and secularism, both challenging and incorporating aspects of them within their own expressions of agency. In doing so, she challenges orthodoxies about women and religion, and particularly the tendency to label women's engagement with religious practice as 'disempowering', with a subtle and powerful account of the negotiation of power and agency within the bounds of Islamic faith. Huq's analysis leads us to a series of important points. Contestation may provide women less scope for the exercise of agency than tactical accommodation and, indeed, compromise; choices that transgress societal norms may be especially hard to make, with risks that are particularly high for women who can least afford to take them.

Penny Johnson's account of Palestinian women who choose education and work outside the home in preference to marriage shows just how tough these choices are, when set against a background of hard struggle against society's expectations. It is difficult for women to transgress social norms even in the most liberal of contexts. When they do, as Jaya Sharma (2009) points out, transgressions may be accompanied by compliance with certain norms in certain circumstances, as women negotiate precarious pathways through thickets of prejudice and constraint. It may be the case, that to be able to acquire certain freedoms, women need to subscribe to certain societal expectations – pretending to be or getting married, wearing certain kinds of clothing, keeping quiet instead of speaking up.

These negotiations are especially interesting for what they tell us about women's own assessment

of opportunities and risks, and also for the way in which we make sense of their exercise of agency. These negotiations can be an essential part of women living their lives and achieving the most positive outcomes that they can from situations not of their own making. They can also make the difference between change happening, albeit at a gradual pace, than it not happening at all. The kind of change that we see in women's everyday lives is much more subtle, much more incremental, than that portrayed by development agencies in their narratives of empowerment. It is often necessary to work within existing strictures to achieve some positive gains, with the hope that these may eventually ripple out and bring about wider changes.

Rosalind Eyben picks up on this point in her exploration of the strategies and tactics used by feminist bureaucrats engaged in 'gender mainstreaming' in aid organisations, revealing some of the subversive tools feminist bureaucrats can draw on in negotiating empowerment within their organisations. Similarly, the journeys of negotiation, accommodation and compromise that women's organisations undertake as they seek out and build alliances are captured in Nazneen and Sultan and Gonçalves' articles. Together they offer rich accounts of the tactics that organisations may need to resort to in order to achieve small gains. These may include avoiding contentious issues and choosing battles you are surer to win, even if this means not confronting existing unequal structures head on. These negotiations may not only be with the state and structures, but may also be within alliances themselves as Nazneen and Sultan show; ultimately these alliances are important – especially for being prepared to take nimble advantage of opportunities for intervention as they arise.

Emerging from these articles is a nuanced account of negotiation, accommodation and compromise that is a welcome corrective to representations that emphasise only the boldest conquests. They paint a rich picture of tactical engagement, but most of all, they highlight the complexities that are part of any process of social change.

## 2 Conclusion

The studies in this *IDS Bulletin* highlight a number of important issues. Mechanisms for promoting women's empowerment – quotas, education and training, credit, legal reforms –

are necessary but not sufficient; they are a means, not an end in themselves. Context matters: the same solutions cannot be rolled out to every region without examining the realities of women's lives and what made them as they are. And the finest policies and laws mean nothing if no one is held to account for their non-implementation. As Mulki Al-Sharmani notes:

Legal reforms (even the most emancipating ones) are not the end result. These reforms are only meaningful insofar as they actually lead to positive and substantive changes in the lives of those who are targeted by the new laws.

Pathways research suggests that significant changes in women's lives are taking place outside the range of conventional empowerment interventions. The kinds of experiences of empowerment and disempowerment that emerge from the articles in this collection highlight

issues that have been neglected by development agencies, such as relationships, leisure, pleasure, love and care. Women's own voices, analyses, experiences and solutions continue to be disregarded in the rush for results. It is time that more attention was paid to them.

Perhaps most of all, what the articles in this *IDS Bulletin* emphasise is that empowerment is a complex process of negotiation, rather than a linear sequence of inputs and outcomes. Policies that view women as instrumental to other objectives cannot promote women's empowerment, because they fail to address the structures by which gender inequality is perpetuated over time. Rather than betting on a limited range of institutional interventions, governments and development agencies would do better investing in creating an enabling environment for women's empowerment, and supporting those who are tackling deeper-rooted issues of power that impede transformative change.

## Notes

- \* We would like to thank Rosalind Eyben, Mariz Tadros, Hazel Reeves, Cecilia Sardenberg and Tessa Lewin for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.
- 1 For more information about the programme and for case studies, working papers, reports, links to video and audio resources and more, see [www.pathwaysofempowerment.org](http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org)
- 2 Pathways was established as a DFID Research Programme Consortium in 2006 and is funded

- by DFID, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The Consortium supports research into women's empowerment in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Brazil, Egypt, Ghana, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Sierra Leone and Sudan, and in global policy spaces.
- 3 See International IDEA for a number of excellent resources on electoral quotas for women: [www.idea.int/gender/quotas.cfm](http://www.idea.int/gender/quotas.cfm) (accessed 12 December 2009).

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# IDS Bulletin

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## CONNECTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

**Editors Deepta Chopra  
and Catherine Müller**



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# Gender Equality in the Post-2015 Development Agenda: Lessons from the MDGs

Gita Sen

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**Abstract** This article addresses some central issues for the Post-2015 Development Agenda from a Southern perspective on gender equality and women's human rights. To answer this question, it first examines what lessons can be learned from the decade or so of implementation of the MDGs. The article focuses on two 'meso' challenges: breaking down issue silos, and integration/participation. It argues that progress towards gender equality will depend on whether the larger development framework addresses central issues such as the growing inequality, informalisation and precariousness of work and incomes that have gone hand in hand with the globalisation of the past three decades. Within a framework that tackles head on the causes and consequences of rising global and national inequality, progress on women's rights requires recognition that gender inequality is pervasive across multiple and intersecting issues. Effectively addressing women's needs and rights requires the building of bridges across policy silos through the integration of issues and participation by women.

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## 1 Introduction

Global debates about the Post-2015 Development Agenda are in high gear at the present time. Multiple, overlapping and sometimes potentially contradictory processes are at work with many stakeholders – governments, multilateral, bilateral and independent organisations, private actors including corporations and other major groups, and a wide range of civil society organisations – heavily engaged in these processes. With so much activity, debate and discussion, as well as new reports and interventions appearing in quick succession, it is easy to lose sight of the wood for the trees. This article asks what that wood might look like from a Southern perspective on gender equality and women's human rights. In order to answer this question, we first examine what lessons can be learned from the decade or so of implementation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In the interests of brevity, the article will not address the question of specific gender goals, targets and indicators even though it recognises that the devil may well be in these details (UN Women 2013).

It focuses instead on two 'meso' challenges: breaking down issue silos, and integration/

participation. It argues that addressing these is especially important to achieving gender equality and fulfilling women's human rights.

An important concern is that the MDGs never really tackled the larger macroeconomic and development framework within which policies or programmes for gender equality are located, or how conducive that framework is likely to be. There is a growing worry that something similar may happen with the Post-2015 Development Agenda (DAWN 2013). From the perspective of gender equality, this lacuna can have a number of consequences. The challenge of informal labour markets provides a useful illustration. The phenomenon of the working poor has been growing in the last three decades of globalisation not only in developing but also in high-income countries, and has been exacerbated in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. Standing (2011) has called such workers the '*precarariat*' – workers who work more than full-time (by organised worker standards) but whose livelihoods are precarious and vulnerable.

In many developing countries, over 80 per cent of women workers belong to this category. The

traditional definition of social security, based on a male breadwinner model, has especially failed women workers as it has ignored the labour and resource requirements of the 'care' economy in the household and structural gender power inequalities. Traditional social protection includes at best maternity benefits (usually only for organised workers unless the state steps in), and does not include childcare or access to clean water, sanitation or fuel that are all critical ingredients of the 'care' economy for which women are held responsible.

Gendered access to resources and divisions of work and responsibilities determine who is most vulnerable within households, why, and at what points in the lifecycle. For instance, this can affect girls' access to food and health care in societies with son-preference, and education in societies that have not yet gone through a demographic transition (so that girls are expected to care for younger siblings while their mothers work) or where secondary schools are distant, do not have women teachers, or clean toilets. It also contributes to women's excessive work burdens, absence of rest or leisure, and inability to obtain the skills and technologies that can enhance their earnings. Widowhood (divorce, desertion) is often a time of great hardship for women – in addition to threats of violence and sexual predation, they are also at risk from attempts to deprive them of inherited assets from their deceased husbands. Women tend to be much poorer than men at older ages.

It is increasingly recognised that social protection has to mitigate such longstanding gendered and other vulnerabilities and deprivation as well as the consequences of growing informalisation of labour. The need for an agreed social protection floor as part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda is very great, especially given the large numbers of people involved and the volatility and unpredictability of multiple risks. Rights-focused approaches can ground such a floor in principles and mechanisms of justiciability and accountability that can provide the best protection for the chronically poor and vulnerable '*precarious*'.

## **2 What have we learned from the MDGs?**

Few would deny that the MDGs successfully focused the global policy spotlight on some key development issues in the past decade. At the

same time, almost from the beginning, there has been criticism and challenge of a number of perceived errors of omission and commission. A number of key actors involved in the assessment of the MDGs and the design of the Post-2015 Development Agenda have voiced some or all of these criticisms and more (Fukuda-Parr 2012; Vandemoortele 2012). They argue that the MDGs diluted the ambition and overarching vision of the Millennium Declaration. In doing so, they 'dumbed down' the richer and more complete goals and targets of the UN conferences of the 1990s, whose approaches were grounded in the lived realities of people's needs in different countries and regions. A major gap was in the area of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The global consensus goal of universal access to reproductive health by 2015 that was reached at the UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994 fell through the cracks until it was recovered much later as Target 5b.

Furthermore, the MDGs missed the interconnected character of the risks and vulnerabilities faced by the very people they were focused on. Risks and vulnerabilities on the basis of economic, social and political inequalities and environmental and demographic factors interact systematically to make risks not only more complex, but also requiring a multifocal approach putting people at the centre, but this was almost completely neglected. The consequence was the creation of a set of goals that became silos in themselves with critical inter-linkages and synergies remaining untapped; this was especially true for how weakly the MDGs addressed the core problem of gender power relations and inequalities.

If this was not enough, there was also no clarity or agreement on the 'hows' – processes, approaches and methods – as distinct from the 'whats' of goals and targets. While the diversity of national and local contexts has of course to be recognised, it is also necessary to have available benchmarks, good practices and implementation challenges. The absence of an effective focus on methods and processes was due in part to the fact that the determination of goals, targets and indicators became in the main a technocratic exercise conducted, as some have said, in windowless rooms in UN buildings, and without

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**Box 1 Has progress towards MDG targets reached women?****Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger**

It is well known that much of the global reduction of more than 800 million people living in extreme poverty from 1990 to 2008 was due to reduction in poverty rates in two countries – India and China. Despite this reduction, women continue to be more likely to live in poverty than men. Women in sub-Saharan Africa are over-represented in poor households, both because they are less likely to have paid work, and because when they do have paid work their average pay is lower than for men. Women's lack of productive resources and their 'time poverty' are important reasons for their relatively higher poverty rates. In the Asia-Pacific region, countries other than India and China have not performed so strongly. It must also be noted that there has been considerable debate about the actual extent of poverty reduction in India, and despite the reduction in the poverty ratio, the actual numbers of poor people have increased, with a concentration in the rural areas where over 65 per cent of the population still live.

The proportion of workers in vulnerable employment is slowly shrinking, but women remain the most affected by far in nearly all regions. The proportion of women workers in the Asian region who are vulnerable (working on their own account or as unpaid family workers) ranged from 41 per cent in West and Central Asia to over 80 per cent in South Asia. This has significant implications both for poverty and hunger, as well as the need for a social protection floor.

**Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education**

There has been significant progress across all developing regions in reducing gender gaps in primary school attendance. The increase in poor girls' attendance has contributed to a 59 per cent reduction in the gap between the richest and poorest girls. However, large differences in attendance persist between rich and poor in all regions, and the quality of education remains poor. These differences are smaller in the Asia-Pacific region and primary education appears to have been a rising tide lifting all boats.

**Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

The situation is less positive for secondary school attendance with much smaller improvements overall, and a persistent gender gap. These results are also true for the Asia-Pacific region.

Unequal pay for comparable work, sometimes even lower statutory minimum wages, and poor working conditions including violation of women's sexual and reproductive rights (lack of toilets, rest breaks, maternity benefits, and childcare facilities), sexual harassment and violence against women are rife among informal women workers in both the organised and unorganised sectors of enterprises. Even allowing for differences in education and training, women's wages are lower than for men. Globally, women occupy only 25 per cent of senior management positions and, in 2008/09 were on average paid 23 per cent less than men.

Women's representation in parliaments has improved only slowly, and is under 25 per cent overall, including even in 'developed regions'. In Southern, Southeastern, and East Asia the range is between 18 and 20 per cent.

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adequate public debate or transparency especially with civil society. Consequently, short shrift was given to the human rights-focused approaches that greater and more genuine participation and engagement of the people for whom the MDGs were intended would likely have prioritised.

Perhaps, most crucially, incorporation of the macroeconomic policy environment (global and national) that generated key policy barriers and enablers for the achievement of the MDGs (such as fiscal, monetary, trade and investment policies) was quite inadequate. While MDG 8 on developing a global partnership for development



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**Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality**

Recent analysis of gender gaps in under-five mortality in countries where data are available shows that the gap favouring boys narrowed in Southern Asia between 1990 and 2011. But differential child mortality rates reflect the consequences of gender bias and daughter aversion in some countries.

**Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health**

Age at first marriage is rising, but women in poor and rural areas continue to marry young, and richer women are more likely to receive needed maternity care. Early and forced marriage of girls and weak access to maternal care are especially (but not exclusively) problems in Southern Asia.

**Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases**

More than 60 per cent of the roughly one million HIV infections among young people aged 15–24, are among girls and women. This means that each year, nearly 600,000 young women are newly infected with HIV. Of the total 2.7 million new HIV infections in 2010, close to one million were among young people aged 15–24, and this does not take account of infections among younger adolescent girls below the age of 15 for whom data are often not collected, and who are among the most vulnerable. Their vulnerability, like that of their older sisters, is due to the pernicious interaction of biological factors and gender power relations. Although the HIV/AIDS epidemic appears to be more under control in Asia than in sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific sub-region is seeing an upward spike in new infections.

**Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability**

The MDG target of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water has apparently been achieved five years ahead of schedule. But, as of 2010, nearly 800 million people still lacked access to improved water sources. Most of them were poor people in rural areas. Where water is not available, it is overwhelmingly the task of women and girls to collect and haul water, sometimes over long distances. Official data suggest that the problem is more serious in sub-Saharan Africa than in Asia; however the reliability of these data is open to question for some countries as they often use the most inclusive measures of access, which are not necessarily a good reflection of the realities on the ground.

**Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development**

The total amount of bilateral sector-allocable aid increased every year between 2008 and 2010. But while the proportion of this aid devoted to gender equality objectives increased in 2009, it stalled in 2010. Generally, the feeling among women's organisations is that funding for civil society organisations that advocate for women's rights has shrunk significantly, and this poses a serious challenge to their ability to hold major stakeholders to account (AWID 2010).

Source UN Women (2012).

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included important elements on trade and debt, this was the MDG that had the least in-built accountability for implementation. Without clarity about the broader development framework, it was perhaps not surprising that the MDGs fell into policy 'silos' with especial damage to the needs of gender equality.

**3 Moving beyond silos – focusing on women**

Policy silos have some obvious advantages. They are relatively simple to design, and easy to execute by line ministries or departments. The MDGs tended from the start to become silos because a number of them were defined in terms of specific issues such as education, maternal

mortality, child mortality, etc. that were congruent with the ambit of line ministries (and specialised UN agencies). This made them easier to monitor and evaluate through a limited set of indicators for the achievement of targets and goals.

Convenient as these policy silos may have been, their very simplicity may have been misleading and overdone. For instance, while MDG 3 on gender equality and women's empowerment was broad, it was given a single target ('eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015'), enshrining thereby the dubious belief that education can be a proxy for all aspects of gender equality. The indicators for this target were somewhat broader and included women's political representation and non-agricultural wage employment, but these were only indicators, not targets. The relationship between these indicators and the target itself was quite unclear.

There has been considerable critique of this by women's organisations and a few UN agencies that challenged this approach as inadequate, and called for recognition of the fact that gender equality cuts across all the MDGs and is essential to their fulfillment (WHO 2003; DAWN 2012). In its recent Gender Chart (UN Women 2012), UN Women provides important evidence confirming this. These data and other reliable evidence point to the extent of the impact of gender inequality on all of the MDGs (see Box 1).

It is clear from the contents of Box 1 that the cross-cutting and multidimensional nature of gender power and inequality cannot be effectively addressed through a single target on education alone as the MDGs attempted to do. The roots of deprivation and inequality lie in power relations that cut across multiple aspects of people's lives and are not specific to particular *issues* such as education or health or hunger. Rather, they appear to be specific to particular groups of *persons* such as women and girls, and also groups disadvantaged or subordinated on other grounds. Furthermore, these multiple sources of power inequality often intersect and reinforce each other. For instance, it is well known that, in India, the intersecting oppressions of economic inequality, caste and gender place poor *dalit* women at the bottom of

the social ordering, such that they are disadvantaged in relation to all of the MDGs, not just one or two. Addressing their disadvantages as persons rather than simply tackling them within issue silos could be a promising approach for the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

How then can the Post-2015 Development Agenda address the need for simplicity and parsimony in goals/targets/indicators without losing the valuable insights provided by a multidimensional approach to gender equality that is based on human rights? One way forward could be to retain the *goals* as broad and issue-focused, for example the goal for gender equality could remain as stated by MDG 3: to 'Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women'. But the *target* derived from the goal could be in terms of specific group/s of people who are disadvantaged, subordinate, at risk or vulnerable. Many advantages can flow from *combining an issue-focused goal with people-focused targets*. By focusing directly on the needs of people in an integrated way, it can become possible to: (1) move beyond issue silos; (2) simultaneously address people's needs directly while having an impact on multiple dimensions of inequality (other things remaining the same); (3) retain the simplicity of having clear goals that are easy to understand while also tackling the question of processes, participation and accountability; (4) guard against policies focusing only on low-hanging fruit in terms of population groups that are less at risk and easier to handle in terms of social subordination; and (5) acknowledge and address the interacting risks and vulnerabilities that people face.

#### **4 Addressing the 'hows' – integration and participation**

An examination of the evidence on the MDGs shows that, across different goals, certain groups of people recur in terms of the observed achievement gaps for many different targets. These include poor women, young people, migrants, *dalits*, ethnic, religious or racial minorities, and indigenous people, *inter alia*. The groups most at risk may vary across regions and countries. The decision about whom to target should be based on clear criteria for indicators determined globally in accordance with human rights standards and human development achievements. Subject to such uniform global criteria, the choice of groups can be made at the national level in a transparent and participatory manner.

Setting targets in terms of the development and wellbeing of chosen groups implies that the needs of group members can be addressed holistically to take advantage of synergies across issues and to prevent degeneration into silos. Thus the development needs of poor rural women in a particular region can include rights to land, livelihoods, housing, childcare, health (including sexual and reproductive health services), literacy/education, employment, freedom from violence, political participation/representation, voice and agency. Addressing these needs holistically requires tackling five dimensions:

- Legal empowerment, including enabling legislation;
- Political participation and voice;
- Economic resources (including, *inter alia*, assets, livelihoods, work and incomes);
- Human development (health, education, water, sanitation, fuel, housing, childcare);
- Social protection to prevent, mitigate and protect against risks and vulnerabilities.

New institutional arrangements in an integrated mode will be required in order to ensure holistic treatment that can cut across line ministries and departments. But such institutions will only be as effective as the resources (financial and human) with which they are set up, and the level, placement and status that they are given (Kabeer and Subrahmanian 1999). One example of an attempt towards integration is the recently constituted National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW), set up in 2010 by the Indian government. Its mission statement says: 'The Mission aims at strengthening processes that promote holistic development of women, gender equality and gender justice through inter-sectoral convergence of programmes impacting women, forging synergy amongst various stakeholders and creating an enabling environment conducive to social change' (NMEW n.d.). It is as yet too early to tell whether the NMEW will have any impact and how much, or whether its aim of holistic treatment and synergy will be matched by financial and human resources or political clout. A weakness is that the NMEW has been placed within the line ministry for women, thereby reducing its autonomy and also possibly its status.

Another critical element of the 'hows' is participation and accountability. Defining targets in terms of people makes it logical to involve

them in determining what should be done and how it should be done to meet the goal. A major criticism of the MDGs was that the design and implementation of targets and indicators was too much of a technocratic exercise. Shifting towards a stronger affirmation of human rights including basic freedoms of self-determination and autonomy needs to be a core part of the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Central to this will be how the agenda itself is set, and how much of a role people will have in shaping it.

Involving people directly in determining what will be done on their behalf will tend to make the choices more grounded and robust. It will also make programme implementation more effective and efficient. For women, this means not only their presence and participation but their voice and leadership. The role of political space for women's leadership cannot be over-emphasised.

An example is India's experience with quotas in village councils mandated by an amendment to the Constitution of India in 1993 that has generated much interest over the years on whether the entry of around a million women into the councils would catalyse social change. Early evidence pointed to mixed results – greater voice and agency for women but also many instances where women were simply 'dummies' or proxies for male family members. New evidence points, however, to more solid and sustained change. A study in the Birbhum district of West Bengal found that, in villages with seat quotas for women in the previous two elections, the proportion of women elected went up significantly even if the village no longer had a quota. Male villagers' evaluation of women leaders' effectiveness went up significantly. Most importantly, the gender gap in aspirations closed for adolescents as did the gap in their educational attainment (J-PAL 2012). Another study in Sangli district in the state of Maharashtra found similar results; with a learning/experience lag of about 3–4 years, elected women leaders performed at least as well as men in the provision of services, and their presence empowered other women to participate in democratic processes (Sathe *et al.* 2013).

This illustrates the importance not only of positive discrimination in levelling the gender playing field but also that it needs time in order to be able to break through long-encrusted patterns of subordination and inequality.

## 5 Conclusion

This article has argued that the Post-2015 Development Agenda has some crucial lessons to learn from the experience of the MDGs.

Progress towards gender equality will depend on whether the larger development framework addresses central issues such as the growing inequality, informalisation and precariousness of work and incomes that have gone hand in hand with the globalisation of the past three decades.

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